



Developing a comprehensive plan for Victim Assistance

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Victim Assistance (VA) programmes have begun to change. New principles for VA have been developed by the states parties and a call for assistance programmes to be inclusive, integrated into existing systems and programmes, and to be viewed as mechanisms to promote social change and human rights was agreed upon by the States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty.

To ensure steps are made and VA programmes implemented accordingly, some countries including Afghanistan were asked to prepare comprehensive plans of action to address the rights and needs of landmine survivors. Developing a comprehensive plan can be challenging at best in many countries particular within countries that lack disability policies, rights based practices, and technical capacities.

Steps to successful planning

Within the above Mine Ban Treaty mandates, how does a VA programme in particular those within Mine Action Centers develop a comprehensive plan to address the rights and needs of landmine survivors? Experience from the Afghanistan programme has shown that a Comprehensive Plan takes comprehensive planning, patience and time.

A plan can not be conceived or conceptualized overnight and it requires the understanding and cooperation of key government actors, disabled persons, donors and disability service providers. The plan and the planning process must be seen to have value for the disability sector and must be inclusive of all relevant actors.

The Progress in Victim Assistance questionnaire provides a good framework to begin discussions within the disability sector and government. Using of the Mine Ban treaty can help stress government obligations and the need for strong disability rights advocacy and sustainable planning processes. Raising awareness about disability sector needs and government obligation is paramount to successful planning and ensures ownership of the process and the outcomes. Making sure that government and disability sector actors have good and reliable information not just on mine victims is essential given the fact that often mine survivors are not the largest group of disabled within the country but they do represent a cross sector of typologies of disability.

Challenges to Successful Planning

Mine Action as a Leader

There are number of challenges for developing comprehensive plans for victim/disability programmes. First and not the least, is that Mine Action actors are not usually leaders

in the disability sector and are not always trusted to be inclusive nor able to think beyond the traditional prosthetic workshop and physiotherapy projects. As stated above, the States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty declared that VA programmes needed to be inclusive of all people with disability and should strive for integrated approaches and in cooperation and coordination with governments.

In Afghanistan, for example, the traditional VA programme of the past has been short lived, mine action donor/funding dependant and unsustainable when left outside the greater disability sector of actors, programme development and alternate donor base funding. Today there are no orthopedic or prosthetic programmes run or funded by the mine action programme and no landmine victim specific programmes in Afghanistan.

Additionally, disability sector actors can be reluctant to buy into VA lead planning processes as it is sometimes perceived as a method to take funding away from them by capitalizing on the “sexiness” of Mine Action.

Bringing all actors together - government, NGOs, and the UN - to develop the concept of cross-cutting programme development and multi-sector cooperation can also be a challenge. Some disability implementers wish to have it all and are reluctant to envision multi-sector planning and implementation through a number of service providers. This includes government who often view their role as full service providers within a specific sector. Donors also often lack an understanding of disability programmes and the role and responsibility of government, disabled persons organizations, NGOs, and mine action organizations.

To begin a comprehensive planning process, raising awareness is essential and helps ensure the cooperation from all government and disability sector actors.

Lack of capacity for Comprehensive Planning

Governments often lack the knowledge and technical background to implement comprehensive data collection and planning exercises for disability programmes and planning. In Afghanistan there has been constant change within the relevant ministry personnel leaving no institutional memory behind. There is also no history of disability programmes except for charity based and paternalistic projects. There has also been a lack of understanding of disability rights and inclusive and mainstreaming practices. This situation is slowly changing and the progress made within government substantial during the past 12-18 months since the development of a comprehensive plan.

Often times it is perceived that only governments lack capacity for comprehensive planning. Whilst this may be true in some countries this is not always a government exclusive problem. Governments are often ill-advised by assistance agencies and technical advisors. Disability programmes are not given priority during other comprehensive planning exercises often lead by assistance agencies. And the implementing agencies of disability programmes often have high turnover and lack the ability to assist with government capacity building let along building their own capacities.

Mine Action programmes also often lack disability specific technical capacities. VA programme officers are very often responsible for more than just VA and many have no disability background at all. VA is also seen as a soft side of mine action and is not well understood by traditional mine action operators leading to a lack of interest in fundraising efforts, lack of understanding for programme needs and directions, and an inability to advocate for disability issues among development partners, mine action implementers and donors.

Getting mine action actors among others including government to understand that prosthetic production is not the answer to VA programming is a substantial challenge for VA project personnel and can have significant impact on effective comprehensive programme development and planning. Many do not understand that landmine survivors represent a cross section of disabling conditions such as the vision and hearing impairment, mental impairment due to head injury and psychological disorder, long term or chronic medical conditions, loss of employment and employment opportunity, loss of educational or vocational opportunity, inability to access services due to physical and social barriers and the loss of social standing and decision making authority. These disabilities are perceived as someone else's responsibility.

Solutions

Advocacy and awareness is key to effecting change in attitude and increasing knowledge about disability issues within government, among donors, development and assistance sectors, and mine action programmes. Increased understanding of integrated programming and the potential cost savings and sustainability of this type of programme can help develop interest within government and the donor community to support a comprehensive plan and the planning process itself.

Finding your allies to support these initiatives is essential too. Without the support of disabled person's organizations, key government officials, donors, national campaigns to ban landmines, and disability service providers, VA programmes will have a very difficult time gathering the needed information and technical expertise to properly execute a comprehensive planning exercises and illicit ownership of the outcomes.

Mine Action programmes can be leaders in disability programming. In some countries they are the only asset available with the mandate to provide assistance. Mine action programmes can take a lead role in coordination and capacity building, but should take care not to disrupt programmes on the ground and within government but to instead build upon what already exists.

These actions fit well within Mine Action mandates and Mine Ban Treaty obligations.

Practical Planning

- Ask for and accept help.

- Identify and invite all relevant actors such as disabled persons groups, technical personnel from NGOs and UN, agencies with the potential for mainstreaming disability actions, health service providers, human rights advocates and other actors to participate in the planning process.
- Engage government and their ministries, in particular those with responsibility for health care, employment, social service and education as they are the most likely institutions for national programme planning and coordination of services.
- Ensure ample time for consultation and planning processes including geographic specific and technical group meetings
- Try not to get too ambitious in the excitement of the planning process
- And remember, nothing is written in stone. Review and revision is required of this process and should not to be perceived as failure.

Conclusion:

From the Afghanistan Mine Action Programme perspective, the process of developing a comprehensive plan that ensures the rights and needs of landmine survivors and other people with disability has been very successful. But it is also one that continues to evolve as national objectives are met, new ones developed and the benchmarks are raised. The Afghanistan government using this plan as a basis for programme implementation, development and advocacy activities has succeeded in a short time the implementation of a number of ongoing activities and has developed the plans and strategies needed to action others. However, funding has been a major impediment for capacity development and the ability to implement activities, coordinate services and monitor programme.

The Mine Action programme in Afghanistan will not implement disability services, but will continue to support the Government of Afghanistan, disability sector actors and disabled persons organizations encouraging them to come together in cooperative and constructive ways and ensure disability programmes and mainstreaming actions are taken to ensure the rights and dignity of landmine survivors and all persons with disability.