

New Research Highlights Plight of Landmine Survivors in Afghanistan, Ukraine and Cambodia

Submitted by: Temple Beautiful

Thursday, 23 June 2022

Ground breaking new research by one of the UK's leading mine action NGOs, the Sir Bobby Charlton Foundation, has exposed the limitations of the international community's current approach to supporting, protecting and caring for the survivors of conflict in some of the world's most war-torn regions. The research found that the current approach risks leaving thousands of victims of conflict and people with disabilities struggling without critical support and facing uncertain futures. The aim of the report is to encourage the sector use the lessons of the past to find solutions for the future.

As the research was carried out prior to the regime change in Afghanistan, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it provides an insight into the challenges faced by people with disabilities in each country, prior to the tumultuous events of the last 12 months. The lessons learnt from the research will help to inform the future response to the crises in Ukraine and Afghanistan and ensure that those affected by conflict are supported in the best way possible.

The research - a detailed analysis of victim assistance in mine action, focusing on the contexts of Afghanistan, Cambodia and Ukraine in 2021 - highlights systemic weaknesses in the system of support for those injured and disabled by mines and explosive remnants of war. The systematic gaps in the provision of services that were evident in the research range from:

- first response and emergency transport to evacuate those injured to hospital;
- a lack of physical and psychological rehabilitation services to aid recovery;
- a failure to provide adequate financial assistance and critical resources to those in poverty;
- a severe lack of inclusive education, social, and employment opportunities for survivors and people with disabilities; and
- a lack of information on the rights of people with disabilities being disseminated among communities affected by landmines, leading to stigma and discrimination towards survivors and persons with disabilities.

The overarching goal of the research is to ensure that those who have been impacted by victim activated explosive ordnance (VAEO) are not left behind.

As part of the research hundreds of VAEO survivors, indirect victims, people with disabilities and service providers in Afghanistan, Cambodia and Ukraine were interviewed and their experiences proved very revealing. These included:

- Injured children dropping out of school in the Afghan capital Kabul due to the stress and anxiety of being newly disabled;
- A female survivor in Afghanistan trying to secure a degree at university while undergoing her physical rehabilitation treatment, working to earn money and caring for her disabled father while not receiving any financial support;
- Three brothers (with 25 children between them) in Afghanistan, who were all injured by a roadside improvised explosive device while farming the land to feed their families;
- A survivor in Cambodia, taken to emergency care in a cow cart after he was injured;

- A female survivor in Cambodia with shrapnel in her head, who had to travel over 500km from her home to do tests once a month for eight years, costing her approximately 170USD per trip (including transportation, food, and accommodation);
- A survivor in Ukraine who had to drag himself for two hours to find help after injuring both his legs in a landmine incident and then taking days to reach appropriate care (being refused transport by the military in the process);
- Survivors of an incident that occurred in Ukraine while clearing landmines for the government, who were forced to lie on top of each other in a small rescue vehicle; and
- Survivors in Ukraine who turned down offers of psychological support due to the stigma associated with mental health.

Key finding in the report include:

- evidence of a sharp drop in victim assistance and mine action funding internationally, despite treaty obligations to support landmine survivors. This has resulted in the scaling back of NGO victim assistance services in Cambodia and more than a third of provinces in Afghanistan with no rehabilitation services to support survivors;
- despite stated free healthcare, over half of those with a disability interviewed in Cambodia said they would rather pay for private healthcare than rely on Government run hospitals with many citing a lack of trust in the system as their reason;
- many disabled people living in poverty, in all three countries, face unnecessary barriers to financial support due to the bureaucratic processes involved in registering their disability and related statuses, which would give them access to financial assistance and free healthcare;
- according to estimates the average person with a disability in Cambodia spends approximately three to four times more on healthcare than people without a disability;
- despite Government and NGO awareness raising programmes in Cambodia, no survivor taking part in the study could name any of the rights they had as a person with a disability;
- even before the current conflict with Russia, fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts of Ukraine (since 2014) meant that landmines and other explosive devices were heavily affecting the lives of people living in both the Government and non-Government controlled areas; and
- most VAEI incidents in Ukraine prior to the current conflict occurred in the “grey zone”, in the area along the contact line between the Government and non-Government controlled areas, where support was largely non-existent. These circumstances are only likely to have worsened and spread since the Russian invasion.

Recommendations resulting from the research include:

Increased involvement and participation of survivors and people with disabilities in the design, delivery and management of policies and programmes in place for their benefit;

Greater prioritisation of victim assistance and rehabilitation projects for survivors and people with disabilities when funding and policy decisions are being made in relation to broader mine action, humanitarian aid and development;

Improved consideration for needs and victim assistance in the collection, management and analysis of data related to mine action, so that levels, trends and changes in need can be tracked and services better targeted;

Enhanced coordination of service provision to establish a holistic approach to victim assistance and maximise the benefits of a multi-sectoral and integrated support; and

Better distribution of information and strategies between countries and agencies, especially from those with significant experience in victim assistance to those in the process of developing new programmes.

Lou McGrath OBE, CEO of the Sir Bobby Charlton Foundation, said:

"By undertaking this research, we wanted to learn from the insight and lived realities of survivors, their families, people with disabilities and others living in landmine contaminated areas. The research has successfully shone a light on the experiences of landmine and bomb blast victims.

"It is our hope that by providing a platform for these invaluable insights to be heard, we will help inform the design and implementation of successful victim assistance policy in the future.

"We acknowledge the obvious changes that have taken place both in Afghanistan and now Ukraine since the field research for this report was undertaken. These changes, however, do not take away from the value of the recommendations. Rather, the changes only exemplify their importance. The lessons of the past that are presented here will help to inform victim assistance stakeholders in both countries when designing policy to support those affected, in the future".

The research author, George Fairhurst, who conducted all the field visits and interviews said:

"Victim assistance in mine action plays an important role by providing an inflow of specialist staff, expertise, and resources to address the increased strain on a country dealing with the presence of mines. The existence of victim assistance structures in a country also drives the design and implementation of rights-based laws, policies, and programmes.

"Despite the crucial role of victim assistance, the service providers I met were struggling to secure the funding they needed to maintain their services and address needs. This suggests that current funding strategies are not suitable or sustainable".

Notes to Editors

The Research

The research was conducted by George Fairhurst and involved field visits to communities, schools, hospitals, physical rehabilitation centres, vocational training centres, and other relevant sites in Afghanistan, Ukraine and Cambodia. The field visits were carried out between July and December 2021 - covering rural, suburban and urban areas. An important part of the investigation in these three countries was to understand 'to what extent victim assistance has been, and continues to be, sufficiently and sustainably supported by the international community'.

Across Afghanistan, Cambodia and Ukraine 481 people participated in interviews: 278 possible programme recipients (149 survivors, and 129 indirect victims) and 182 administrators and service providers. In addition to the field interviews, online interviews with stakeholders of 25 national and international organisations, donors and agencies working in the mine action, humanitarian aid and development spheres

were conducted.

The full report can be downloaded here.

About The Sir Bobby Charlton Foundation

The Sir Bobby Charlton Foundation (SBCF) was founded in 2011 by football legend Sir Bobby Charlton following a visit to Cambodia where he witnessed first-hand the devastating impact that landmines and the explosive legacy of war was still having on innocent civilian communities more than 20 years after the conflict had ended. On returning to the UK Sir Bobby established The SBCF as a not-for-profit conflict recovery NGO. Today, The SBCF is a well-respected member of the international humanitarian & development sectors and is making a crucial contribution to the safety and well-being of conflict affected people. It does this in three ways:

- I. Humanitarian & Development Assistance;
- II. Education and Training; and
- III. Research and Innovation.

The Mine Ban Treaty

Antipersonnel landmines, unexploded ordnance (UXOs), and other victim-activated explosive devices continue to have a major humanitarian, socioeconomic, and environmental impacts in over 50 countries, covering thousands of kilometres of land, and causing thousands of casualties each year. To counter the direct humanitarian impacts of anti-personnel mines, victim Assistance (VA) was officially inaugurated in the Convention on the Prohibition of Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (APMBC), 1997. The document outlined that:

"Each State Party in a position to do so shall provide assistance for the care and rehabilitation, and social and economic reintegration, of mine victims and for mine awareness programs. Such assistance may be provided, inter alia, through the United Nations system, international, regional or national organizations or institutions, the International Committee of the Red Cross, national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies and their International Federation, non-governmental organizations, or on a bilateral basis." (Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, 1997)

Since 1997, victim assistance has been one of the five pillars of mine action.

For further information, photo images, quotes and/ or arrange interviews with the Sir Bobby Charlton Foundation CEO, Lou McGrath OBE and/or the research author, George Fairhurst, please contact:-

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