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Caught in the Crossfire: Challenges to Providing Victim Assistance in Colombia

Due to ongoing civil conflict, many Colombian civilians experience both financial and physical harm, but those living in rural areas have limited or no access to much-needed medical and economic assistance. In conjunction with governmental and nongovernmental organizations, as well as multinational corporations, the Polus Center for Social and Economic Development assesses the needs of and provides rehabilitative services to residents in these remote areas.

by Michelle Miller [Polus Center for Social and Economic Development]



Landmine survivors receive training to build mobility aids for other victims of conflict.

Photo courtesy of Stephen Petegorsky.

Colombia's ongoing civil conflict is complicated by several non-state actors, each trying to gain control over territory for their own agendas. Many citizens in rural areas are geographically distanced from the national army and can be left with the uncomfortable choice of joining one of the groups or remaining unaffiliated and trying to protect themselves and their families. The state's military faces enormous challenges as it is difficult for both national soldiers and for many civilians to know who is a part of which group and who is an innocent bystander.

The most prominent non-state armed group involved in the conflict is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Notoriously violent, FARC uses landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), as well as kidnapping and extortion, to gain control over territory and followers. According to the *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*, FARC is the most prolific user of anti-personnel (AP) landmines in the world, complicating the government's attempts to demine the country in accordance with the *Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention* (APMBC).¹ Although many civilians in Colombia are intimidated by FARC, some impoverished Colombians living in rural areas are drawn to its Marxist ideology that provides some semblance of hope toward lifting themselves out of poverty.

In addition to FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN) fights to protect what it perceives to be its territory, often using AP mines and IEDs to meet their objectives.¹ Paramilitary groups are prevalent in the country as well, and though the *Monitor* reports no evidence that they have used landmines since 2006, these groups do pose a threat to civilians.¹ Paramilitaries may misidentify individuals as a member of one of the other illegal armed groups and civilians may inadvertently get caught in battles between the paramilitaries, FARC or ELN.

Consequences of Conflict

The ongoing violence has left many survivors in its wake. In 2009, the government passed legislation to assist these victims. Colombia's Victims and Land Restitution Law, commonly referred to as the Victims Law, was designed to provide compensation to over 3.7 million Colombians who have been displaced from their homes and farms, giving them rights to land and financial compensation as reparations.² However, these services often do not reach a large portion of the Colombian population living outside of the country's major cities. This is one of many challenges to providing victim assistance (VA) in Colombia. Thirty percent of the population lives in poverty and close to 12 million people live in the rural countryside.³ Most of the rural areas now have electricity, according to the Colombian Coffee Growers Federation (FNC), but life is still difficult. Access to services is limited, cutting many people off from medical assistance and police protection. Rural areas are challenging not only because of physical distance from cities, but also because of security concerns posed by armed groups. A journey to the city for medical care could easily be compromised by a guerrilla attack. State actors and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) trying to bring services to the rural areas are also at risk.

Addressing Victims' Needs

The Polus Center for Social and Economic Development (Polus Center) is a U.S.-based NGO that has worked since 2005 to mitigate the effects of violence by providing rehabilitation services to people living in remote areas of Colombia. The Polus Center has partnered with the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), FNC and the *Centro Integral de Rehabilitacion de Colombia* (CIREC). FNC is a Colombian nonprofit that supports the well-being of Colombian coffee growers and has an extensive network throughout the country. CIREC is a Colombian nonprofit organization that provides mobility aids to landmine survivors and victims of conflict. The Polus Center's Coffeelands Trust project is a public-private partnership with PM/WRA and coffee companies such as Keurig Green Mountain that provides assistance to coffee farmers who are landmine survivors or victims of conflict.

In August 2014, the Polus Center formed a delegation with its partners and local landmine survivors to visit Samana, a rural community in the Caldas department, which has a population of approximately 25,000. The delegation witnessed firsthand some of the ongoing difficulties for victims of the conflict, the majority of whom live outside of the urban



A holistic approach to victim assistance is necessary to connect people with the services they need.
Photo courtesy of Stephen Petegorsky.

areas.¹ Of those living in the Caldas department, approximately 18,000 live in Samana proper while others live one to five hours away by car. The entire community was uprooted and displaced by the rebels when FARC occupied Samana, its fighters forcing people to evacuate their homes within 24 hours. With no place to go they were driven from their farms, which were their livelihoods. Samana is six hours by car to Manizales or Bogotá and is an arduous drive on difficult roads through the mountains, though most residents of Samana do not have automobiles.

The delegation interviewed 22 survivors, selected as representatives of the community by FNC. Survivors identified four core needs that FNC affirmed were consistent throughout most of the population: healthcare, education, higher income and housing. In Samana, as in many rural areas, access to medical services is limited or inaccessible. Because people cannot access healthcare, conditions that might otherwise be treatable become crippling and in some cases even fatal. Many people who are landmine/IED survivors and those with healthcare needs have limited mobility. Combined with poverty and distance from the cities, this has created a situation in which many people are in need of urgent medical care.

Furthermore, educational levels are extremely low, schools are vastly ill-equipped and the majority of the population does not attend school past the primary level. Housing is inadequate; several of those interviewed had constant flooding because of leaking rooftops. Many had consistent health issues due to the lack of proper sanitation facilities. These issues are augmented by ongoing fears of violence. The roads in and out of the town are dangerous, especially after nightfall, making it difficult for services to reach people.



Elkin Giraldo plays an integral role in the work in Samana, helping to gather information from and provide services to his neighbors.

Photo courtesy of Michael Lundquist.

Elkin Giraldo

Elkin Giraldo is a young man from Samana, Colombia, whose story encapsulates several of the ongoing challenges to providing victim assistance in Colombia. Giraldo stepped on a landmine shortly before the rebels invaded his town; he was one of many people impacted by landmines planted by FARC combatants. He lost the lower part of his right leg in the explosion. Giraldo is 26 today, but he was only 21 when the FARC invaded his town. The rebels appeared on Giraldo's doorstep and gave him less than a day to abandon his home and farm. Though he had nowhere to go, he was newly married and had a one-year-old son and felt he had no option but to pack what he could carry and flee. On the road the family was soon caught between competing forces, and Giraldo had an impossible choice. He could fight for one of the rebel groups, abandoning his family and risking his life, or he could attempt to flee and become an enemy of both. Eventually Giraldo was permitted to continue on with his family without joining the army, though they had nowhere to go and remained on the run until the FARC left Samana two years later. Giraldo has since worked to rebuild his farm and his house to provide for his young son and wife.

The internal partners at FNC and CIREC have significant knowledge of the rural communities of Colombia, and have confirmed that the situation in Samana is similar to that of many people living outside of major cities. The Colombian government rid Samana of the rebels but other rural areas are still heavily affected by continuing violence. So removed from the cities, it is not surprising that many people in rural areas are still unaware of the rights to which they are entitled according to the Victims Law. Many of those who are familiar with the law have difficulty registering with the government to receive their benefits. Most landmine/IED survivors live in rural areas, so the most vulnerable victims of the conflict are the most removed from services. However, by the end of the delegation trip to Samana, the Polus Center was able to reach people living in a very remote area, providing access to much-needed services and information.

The principal impediment to reaching people living in rural areas is security, due to the continuing threat of violence. The Polus Center managed this situation by working through agronomists and outreach workers employed by FNC. These specialists are invested in and have a unique knowledge of the

rural areas, enabling them to navigate the areas with minimal risk. They are also experts in coffee production; coffee is the principal crop in Colombia and the experts' visits are welcomed.

The Polus Center trained outreach workers to interview victims in a manner that effectively identifies, assesses and prioritizes their needs. Many survivors would rather have meaningful work than a prosthetic or a roof over their house, but this may not be immediately obvious. Each survivor needs a unique set of supports that can only be determined through a careful and coherent method of interviewing. In addition to providing this training, the Polus Center has employed survivors themselves to work with their neighbors to design and implement individualized programs. Over the next two years, the 22 people interviewed in Samana in August 2014 will receive support in accordance with the needs they identified as the most pressing during the interviews. Eighteen people will receive new or improved houses, seven will receive specialized health care access, and 22 will receive economic support to increase and/or diversify their sources of income. Additionally, 84 mobility aids will be distributed in Samana and surrounding towns. Follow-up interviews will be conducted with



Outreach workers and agronomists know and are personally invested in rural areas in Colombia and are critical to delivering information and services to local people.
Photo courtesy of Michael Lundquist.

all beneficiaries after the items and services are received.

A Path Forward

The solution to the disconnect between services and victims lies in public-private partnership that actively engages the victims. This arrangement benefits everyone involved and offers a unique opportunity for survivors to receive empowering training and employment. The Polus Center has a successful history of working with public-private partnerships and utilizing a holistic approach to provide services to victims. There continue to be challenges to providing VA in Colombia, but participatory partnerships such as the Coffeelands Trust's collaboration with internal organizations such as FNC and CIREC, and U.S.-based entities such as Keurig Green

Mountain, PM/WRA and the Polus Center will pave the way forward. Combining the knowledge and expertise of Colombian nonprofits dedicated to the wellbeing of victims of conflict and other vulnerable people with the resources of international NGOs and the support of the private sector promises to bridge the gap between the government and the citizens who most need its support. ©

See endnotes page 66



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