ACKNOWLEDGE, AMEND, ASSIST:
Addressing Civilian Harm Caused by Armed Conflict and Armed Violence
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Caused by Armed Conflict and Armed Violence

Harvard Law School Human Rights Program
and
Action on Armed Violence

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International concern about the civilian impact of armed conflict and armed violence has grown over the past two decades. The concept of human security has shifted attention from national security to the security of individuals. Introduced in the UN Development Programme’s 1994 Human Development Report, human security has also been used to guide discussions of the conduct of war. Since 1999, the UN Security Council has requested 10 reports on the protection of civilians from the Secretary-General. These reports highlight current threats to civilians from armed conflict and assess promising advances and emerging problems in the field of civilian protection. Humanitarian disarmament, which places the well-being of civilians at the center of disarmament law, has become an accepted method of governing weapons. It originated in the adoption of the Mine Ban Treaty in 1997 and proved its viability with the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions.

While these and other developments seek primarily to prevent civilian casualties before they happen, there has also been a move to address the needs of civilians after harm has occurred. Those who work to enhance and expand assistance to civilian victims adopt a range of strategies. They share the common goal of alleviating human suffering, and their achievements to date show that this moral imperative has become a legal and policy priority. Differences among approaches are evident, however. They target either lawful or unlawful harm, assign responsibility for providing assistance to different parties, call for various forms of recognition and aid, and have distinct underpinnings.

This publication examines five methods currently used to mitigate the harm to civilian victims and identifies key issues they raise comparatively. The approaches—in alphabetical order—casualty recording, civilian harm tracking, making amends, transitional justice, and victim assistance—are described in detail in individual chapters written by experts in the selected fields. By presenting the five approaches together, the publication seeks to increase understanding of the strategies, their shared principles and differences, and the challenges they face individually and collectively. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and do not represent an exhaustive list of responses to civilian harm, but they serve as a starting point for consideration of how more effectively and efficiently to reduce the suffering of civilians.

Origins of Publication

This publication originated in a two-day summit at Harvard Law School entitled “Acknowledge, Amend, Assist: Addressing Civilian Harm Caused by Armed Conflict and Armed Violence.” The summit, held in October 2013, was co-sponsored by the Harvard Law School Human Rights Program and Action on Armed Violence. It brought experts from governments, militaries, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and universities together to explore the challenges of meeting victims’ needs. Participants all had experience working with one or more of the humanitarian responses listed above. They came from a dozen countries across six continents making it a global event.

The primary objective of “Acknowledge, Amend, Assist” was to examine how to strengthen efforts to address civilian harm. Through a public symposium and a private workshop, participants learned more about one another’s approaches and where their work might coincide and/or conflict. By initiating an interdisciplinary discussion, the summit provided an opportunity for experts to consider how assistance could be coordinated and where gaps remained. This complementary publication seeks to build on the collective energy of the summit and present the issues to a wider audience of practitioners and academics as well as the interested public.

Approaches to Addressing Civilian Harm

The individual chapters of this publication discuss five approaches to addressing the needs of civilian victims. The first three—casualty recording, civilian harm tracking, and making amends—are emerging, non-binding norms, while the last two—transitional justice and victim assistance—have a basis in existing law.

Casualty recording and civilian harm tracking both involve gathering casualty data that can acknowledge victims, facilitate assistance, and help prevent future
international actors often step in when states are unwilling to respond to the needs of both individual victims and to bring legal action against a party at a later date. Responsibility for implementing transitional justice, but his chapter, Simon Robins describes how transitional justice can focus on legal remedies to end impunity. Proponents urge states to assume primary responsibility for recording casualties because states are more likely to have the mechanisms to do so; they also recommend that other actors, especially NGOs, do independent data collection to hold states to account. In practice to date, NGOs have done the bulk of casualty recording. Recorders compile and disaggregate as many details as they can about specific incidents and the people killed. The aim of casualty recording is to recognize individual victims who died, but its results indirectly aid the provision of assistance to those victims left behind.

In contrast to casualty recording, civilian harm tracking deals exclusively with armed conflict and conceives harm broadly to include death, injury, and property damage. According to Sahr Muhammedally and Marla Keenan, tracking is conducted by warring parties, who may rely on internal and/or public sources of information. The collection and analysis of data reveal trends that can lead to changes in military training and tactics, and thus prevent future harm. In addition, identification of individual victims allows warring parties better to respond to the needs of those harmed in the past.

Making amends calls on warring parties to recognize and assist civilian victims of harm caused by the parties’ lawful actions in armed conflict. Sahr Muhammedally explains that amends seek to help civilians who were “collateral damage” of lawful attacks. Amends can take a range of forms, including apologies, compensation, and in-kind support. The approach places the burden on warring parties because they inflicted the harm. The provision of amends, however, does not impute legal liability to the warring parties or preclude victims from bringing legal action against a party at a later date.

Transitional justice aims to provide a comprehensive response to the needs of both individual victims and societies as a whole; it encompasses prosecutions, truth-telling mechanisms, and reparations programs. In his chapter, Simon Robins describes how transitional justice can foster participation of victims in the process and seek to address victims’ needs. They also recognize that even if one party bears primary responsibility for providing assistance, in practice there will be multiple players involved. The approaches also differ on several counts. In some cases, their distinctive characteristics complement each other and allow for greater protection of victims. For example, while transitional justice deals with victims of unlawful acts, making amends seeks to fill a hole and add to the needs of those caught in the crossfire of lawful operations. Casualty recording and civilian harm tracking focus on a wide variety of support, such as financial compensation, medical care, and memorialization. They generally encourage the participation of victims in the process and seek to address victims’ needs. They also recognize that even if one party bears primary responsibility for providing assistance, in practice there will be multiple players involved. The approaches also differ on several counts. In some cases, their distinctive characteristics complement each other and allow for greater protection of victims. For example, while transitional justice deals with victims of unlawful acts, making amends seeks to fill a hole and address the needs of those caught in the crossfire of lawful operations. Casualty recording and civilian harm tracking focus on a wide variety of support, such as financial compensation, medical care, and memorialization. They generally encourage the participation of victims in the process and seek to address victims’ needs. They also recognize that even if one party bears primary responsibility for providing assistance, in practice there will be multiple players involved.

In other cases, the approaches are based on competing principles, which could interfere with efforts to help victims. Perhaps most notably, civilian harm tracking and making amends assign the warring party primary responsibility for the harm it caused, while the three remaining approaches place a greater burden on the state that has jurisdiction or control over the territory in which the victim resides. This kind of contradiction can lead to tension among advocates and confusion among potential assistance providers. In addition, a lack of consensus surrounds the precise definition of “victim.” Should it cover victims of armed conflict or be expanded to include people who suffer harm during armed violence? Should it apply to individuals killed, both the dead and injured, or those who lost property as well as those who experienced injuries? Such inconsistencies have the potential to let some victims arbitrarily fall through the cracks.

The role of law in addressing the needs of victims is another subject open to debate. At the Harvard summit, some participants argued that hard law has the benefits of binding states parties and influencing non-parties through stigmatization. The codification of victim assistance requirements in the Convention on Cluster Munitions exemplifies that conviction. By contrast, other participants found international law inadequate or too difficult to achieve at this point. For example, proponents for making amends have not sought international legal obligations because they fear losing states’ support; instead they encourage countries to adopt strong national laws and policies. Advocates for casualty recording and civilian harm tracking have similarly focused on standard setting rather than the development of legally binding instruments. Transitional justice, the oldest approach addressed in this publication, rests on a combination of hard and soft law, including international humanitarian, human rights, and criminal law treaties supplemented by global norms.

In addition to revealing points of commonality and difference, the authors’ chapters illuminate obstacles to and critiques of implementation of the five approaches. The three newer strategies require wider political support in order to become firmly established. They also have to overcome resource constraints and practical obstacles to gathering data and determining culturally appropriate amends. Transitional justice is a longer-standing mechanism, but it has evolved from a victim-centered regime to a more international and institutional framework. As a result, it has in practice become detached from specific victims’ needs. Victim assistance has legal weight only in certain disarmament fora, yet it has a broad view of “victim” and prioritizes non-discrimination. It must therefore make efforts to meet the needs of victims of banned weapons while ensuring they do not receive aid at the expense of other victims of armed conflict or armed violence.

Conclusion

Drawing on the Harvard summit, this publication constitutes a first step in forging an ongoing dialogue about how better to address civilian harm. By examining the five approaches separately and together, it seeks to enhance understanding of the strategies and identify important issues surrounding their relationships. It also considers ways to strengthen the individual approaches while encouraging collaboration among their proponents. Future steps could include further discussion among a broader group of interested actors, increased engagement of victims in the process, and the generation of shared principles. The long-term goal of the initiative begun at Harvard is to promote more effective, coordinated, and complementary assistance that will improve the lot of civilian victims of armed conflict and armed violence.
Casualty recording strives comprehensively, systematically, and continuously to record all deaths directly attributable to armed violence as well as the circumstances of these deaths. Casualty recording is particularly concerned with situations of armed conflict, widespread organized or uncontrolled crime, weakened state capacity, or other circumstances in which increased deaths due to violence are common. The call for recording casualties takes into account that despite the understanding that civilians are vulnerable and frequently killed in armed violence, little is done proactively to understand the details of such deaths.

At a minimum, casualty recording captures date, location, individual identities or numbers killed, description of the means of harm/type of violence involved, and sources of this information. The ultimate goal of casualty recording should be the compilation of comprehensive information on victims, incidents, and perpetrators and the public acknowledgment of casualties.

The Purposes of Casualty Recording

The primary purpose of casualty recording is to recognize individuals killed in armed violence who would otherwise remain nameless and unacknowledged in death. The idea of public recognition relates to the notion that the truth should be disclosed. Casualty recording also addresses families’ right to know the fate of their loved ones and communities’ demand for full understanding of how violence has affected them.

Other outcomes, whether or not intended, have been discerned in the work of nongovernmental, UN, and state entities that record casualties. In particular, research has shown how casualty recording and the information it produces facilitate the efforts of actors working on armed violence. It can provide vital situational awareness and trend analysis and assist in the delivery of humanitarian services. It can also support accountability and transitional justice procedures.1 These benefits of casualty recording exist alongside the core purposes centered on individual victims, such as fulfilling the right of the bereaved to know the fate of their loved ones.2

Mechanisms and Actors

Most communities have mechanisms to record deaths. These tend to rely on police and hospital systems through which individuals killed in extraordinary or even mundane circumstances are recorded, their families informed, and, where applicable, investigations into their deaths undertaken. This is the most common way in which casualties are—and should be—recorded.

Where such systems do not exist, are failing, or are inadequate, other forms of casualty recording should be advocated for and undertaken. The approach recommended might depend on the needs of the populations in the environment and the capacities of the actors that are able to undertake casualty recording. For example, in armed conflicts where regular systems underperform or do not exist, in order to ensure the recognition of every casualty, it may be appropriate for the central state (insofar as it is functional), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), intergovernmental organizations, parties to the conflict, or a combination of these actors to develop practices for recording casualties in an effective and systematic way. The specific responsibility to record casualties in this manner arises when the entities normally responsible no longer function. The division of roles is discussed further below.

The Every Casualty Campaign has focused exclusively on deaths caused in armed conflict and armed violence. The campaign, which is coordinated by the NGO Every Casualty, has spearheaded the call for casualty recording.3 Considering that the term “casualty” can also refer to people who are injured short of death, however, mechanisms could evolve and record individuals who were injured. Whereas deaths are clearly identifiable, injury reporting is somewhat more complex. For instance, if injuries include physical, psychological, and long-term harm, there must be agreement as to the scope of these terms in order to ensure comparability of data.

Responsibility for Casualty Recording

States are primarily responsible for ensuring that casualty recording is undertaken within territory they control and in other areas in which they operate. Recognition of the principle that every casualty should be recorded is increasing among states. While the call for casualty recording focuses on the actions of states, in principle it applies to all actors engaged in armed violence. Therefore, non-state actors who have de facto control over a territory also bear a responsibility to record casualties.

NGOs play a major role in recording casualties, filling gaps left by inactive state actors and conflict parties. More than 50 such organizations working in conflict and post-conflict environments and situations of widespread armed violence around the world now form an international peer network of casualty recorders, the Casualty Recorders Network.4 In most contexts, generating an independently produced record of casualties is highly important, for example, to ensure a comprehensive record and to hold state-led recording efforts to account. Therefore, in all situations of armed violence and particularly where a state is unable or unwilling to record casualties, the state and conflict parties should ensure access and protection for those entities recording deaths, such as NGOs, other civil society actors (including religious institutions), and intergovernmental organizations.

Every Casualty is currently working with UN entities in an effort to build their capacity to record casualties. While there is interest in pursuing casualty recording, and evidence that it is occurring in some conflict environments, much work remains to be done in building both the political will and technical capacities of UN agencies and offices to record casualties.5

How Are Casualties Recorded?

Casualties should be recorded in a format that is disaggregated by incident or individual, and by as much further detail as possible about victims, incidents, and groups or persons that have caused harm. Practitioners may record casualties in a database or spreadsheet according to this type of disaggregation.

There are a range of approaches to recording casualties, as identified by Every Casualty’s research into the practice of 40 casualty recorders, published in 2012.6 Different sources and methods of investigation, corroboration, and verification may be available to casualty recorders based on the context, such as whether casualty recording is being done during or after an armed conflict. In general, casualty recording may be done through the gathering and corroborating of documentary sources (including media and social media reports), through on-the-ground investigation using interviews with witnesses, through forensic techniques to identify unknown victims, or through a mixture of these approaches. From its research, Every Casualty identified seven key principles for effective casualty recording that should be followed as long as it is safe to do so. A casualty recorder’s work should:

1. Be, and be viewed as, impartial and reliable;
2. Have clear, transparent definitions and inclusion criteria;
3. Have a transparent methodology, with multiple-stage checking procedures;
4. Be connected to local communities;
5. Use multiple sources;
6. Publish disaggregated incident/individual level information;
7. Be open to correction, or the addition of new information.

Drawing from these principles, Every Casualty is developing a set of standards for casualty recording practice with practitioners and end-users of their data to be concluded in 2015.7 The standards will cover the following areas:

1 For more information on transitional justice, see chapter on Transitional Justice in this publication.
3 The campaign, a coalition of more than 50 NGOs, calls on states, in partnership with other actors, to recognize every casualty of armed violence by ensuring that all casualties are promptly recorded, correctly identified, and publicly acknowledged. See www.everycasualty.org/campaign. The Every Casualty Campaign is coordinated by Every Casualty, a London-based NGO dedicated to advancing the cause of casualty recording worldwide. See www.everycasualty.org and contact team@everycasualty.org.
The Role of Victims in Casualty Recording

Casualty recording is concerned with all lawful and unlawful deaths in an armed violence environment. The term “victim” under this approach is defined broadly to include not only the dead themselves, but also survivors including those injured, their families and loved ones, and populations affected by violence. Survivors and affected populations are both a crucial source of information and an audience or intended beneficiary group for many casualty-recording organizations.

Where these victims are a source of information, attention to ethical and security issues is of key importance in casualty recording, and earning the trust and understanding the needs of victims is crucial. Knowing local languages, having cultural sensitivity, and being aware of the difficulties and traumas that might be experienced by those giving testimony to casualty recorders are highly valuable.

The recognition of victims is at the heart of the concept of casualty recording. Where victims are an intended audience of casualty recorders, a well-established connection or relationship is necessary to produce and relay back information in the most relevant and respectful way, especially to marginalized groups. Victims should, and in many existing efforts do, participate in processes such as memorialization undertaken as a result of casualty recording.

Victims also stand to benefit whenever the results of casualty recording are fed into other mechanisms, such as those for the compensation of injured persons or surviving family members, or in transitional justice and accountability processes.

Frameworks for Casualty Recording

There is no consistent international legal framework requiring that every casualty of armed violence be recorded. Every Casualty has analyzed whether existing law requires the recording of civilian casualties in armed conflict and concluded that there are some related obligations for armed forces in armed conflict. Drawing on international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL), there appears to be a duty to record civilian casualties, but it is fragmented between IHL and IHRL in customary and treaty law. The components of this requirement are found in obligations to identify casualties, notify relatives, bury with dignity, record the sites of the burials, and search for the missing. Of relevance to the recording of casualties of armed violence more broadly, the obligation to search for the missing is a customary law obligation that applies whether a conflict exists or not.8

Creating a more formal legal framework to record casualties would require considerable political will. Initially, a set of guiding principles that could be adopted by states, non-state actors, and civil society could be pursued to advance casualty recording globally.

In the absence a legal framework, ensuring recognition of victims through comprehensive data collection is a very real challenge, as is determining the full impact of armed violence. Good practice in casualty recording exists, but consistent global practice must be established. Casualty recording can already be seen to support the implementation and spirit of international frameworks such as the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict as well as IHL and IHRL.9 Moral arguments relating the recording of casualties to human dignity also provide a compelling case for action to record casualties. Operational arguments further help encourage robust and consistent casualty recording practices; they demonstrate how casualty recording supports the programmatic and policy objectives of states, inter-governmental organizations, and NGOs that work to benefit violence-affected populations.

Despite the absence of a definitive international legal framework, the information obtained as a result of current casualty recording practice by states, NGOs, and UN entities contributes, for example, to:

- Effective advocacy with parties to conflict to change policy and practice in order to better protect civilians and reduce civilian casualties;
- Compensation and other mechanisms to assist survivors, such as war benefits;
- Accountability and transitional justice procedures, especially war crimes trials and truth commissions;
- The public acknowledgment of victims through memorialization.10

These crucial elements of preventing and addressing civilian harm would be advanced by the adoption of both additional effective mechanisms and a new legal framework for recording the casualties of armed violence.

For More Information


The tracking of civilian harm by warring parties is an emerging best practice in conflict zones, such as Afghanistan and Somalia. Civilian harm encompasses loss of life, injury, and property damage. When properly implemented, civilian harm tracking has led to fewer civilian casualties. A warring party that prioritizes civilian well-being needs reliable data to assess the impact of its operations, to analyze and learn from the data, and to appropriately respond to civilian harm by both adjusting tactics and training and making amends to civilians harmed.11

**The Definition and Process of Civilian Harm Tracking**

Civilian harm tracking, analysis, and response is the internal process by which a military or peacekeeping operation gathers data on civilian harm caused by its operations and the use of force in future planning and operations. Such information can also be used to guide actions to properly respond to civilian losses.12

Data can come from a variety of internal sources, including field liaison reports, battle damage assessments, spot reports, troop movements, weapons discharge and targeting data, reporting chains among troops, and investigations of alleged incidents of civilian harm.13 It can also come from external sources, such as victims themselves, civil society, hospitals, and the media. Accurate and timely reporting, within the chain of command, of possible incidents of civilian harm is critical to ensure commanders and their staff have the information they need to investigate these events and the circumstances under which they occurred.

A civilian harm tracking, analysis, and response “cell” requires specialized human resources, information management systems, and technological equipment. The tracking cell staff at headquarters analyzes information for trends and notes protection opportunities and challenges to be addressed by senior military officials in tactical directives or training.

**The Purpose of Civilian Harm Tracking**

Over time, tracking of civilian harm accomplishes four things:

1. Creates an awareness among troops/peacekeepers in the field that the impact of their operations on the civilian population is documented and taken seriously by command;
2. Reduces civilian harm by providing commanders and military planners with information and analysis aimed at adjusting tactics to minimize future harm;
3. Helps commanders appropriately respond to confirmed incidents of civilian harm with factual information and credible evidence to push back against false claims;
4. Enables forces to separate out cases that warrant legal investigation for possible violations and to make amends to civilians for cases of incidental harm through the use of detailed information about who was harmed and when.

While tracking is a process internal to a warring party, officials can also release data to report to political institutions such as NATO, the African Union, or the United Nations on mission progress, to respond publicly to any alleged civilian harm, and eventually to recognize civilians who have suffered harm. These actions benefit the civilian population and the mission.

**Why Track Civilian Harm?**

There are ethical, strategic, and legal reasons why warring parties should track, analyze, and respond to civilian harm. Warring parties include multinational coalitions, host nation militaries, peacekeeping operations, individual state militaries, and even non-state armed groups.

Ethically, many warring parties—such as countries contributing troops to the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)—have publicly stated their concern for civilians caught in the crossfire. Establishing a tracking cell backs those words up with actions and allows warring parties to demonstrate they are assessing the impact of their operations and, when necessary, changing tactics to minimize harm—even if such harm meets key international humanitarian law (IHL) requirements including proportionality and military necessity.

Strategically, warring parties may find that mission success depends on their ability to minimize and mitigate harm to civilians from their operations. Their very success may in fact be measured, at least in part, on their ability to prevent incidental civilian harm and appropriately respond to those harmed. Establishment of a functioning cell and regular release of public information can go a long way toward showing the population that a military is actively working and has a plan in place to reduce and address civilian harm. An effective tracking, analysis, and response mechanism will not in itself “win” the conflict, but the lack of one may very well lose it, turning tactical successes into overall strategic failure.

Legally, civilian harm tracking by a warring party also allows it to illustrate through data the measures the conflict party is undertaking to adhere to—and in some cases go above and beyond—international humanitarian law. IHL requires warring parties to ensure proportionality, which means that anticipated harm caused to civilians and civilian objects cannot be excessive in relation to the expected military gain. Also, combat operations must not be directed specifically at civilians or civilian objects. Warring parties must take “all feasible precautions” to minimize incidental harm to civilians and civilian objects. While tracking civilian harm is not a formal IHL requirement, warring parties who abide by an ethos of civilian protection can implement this tool to further reduce even incidental harm. For instance, a tracking cell allows the conflict party to compare post-operation data with pre-operation estimates; the comparison may reveal that targeting assumptions were correct, or in cases where the assumptions were incorrect, that intelligence gathering and targeting decisions should be modified in the future.

**Civilian Harm Tracking in Practice**

There is growing recognition among states and the United Nations of the importance of civilian harm tracking and analysis. The 2013 UN Secretary-General’s Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict recommended that:

In recognition of the proven utility of civilian casualty tracking as a means of informing military strategy to reduce harm to civilians, parties to conflict, including in the context of multinational peacekeeping operations and United Nations peacekeeping missions involved in offensive operations, should establish and implement such mechanisms.14

**Afghanistan**

In the early years of the war in Afghanistan, the US Department of Defense did not keep track of civilian casualties and the numbers were publicly referred to as “minimal.” Reports of civilian harm by the United States were often denied in the media, only to be admitted days later as evidence arose. Lack of acknowledgment of and inability to address civilian harm left the United States and its allies with a massive credibility deficit, both locally within Afghanistan and, eventually, at the international level.

Recognizing the importance of addressing the problem of civilian harm, in 2008 General David McKiernan, then head of the International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan, established the first-ever Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell (CCTC).15 The aim of this cell was to document and analyze information in order to inform commanders of the impact of their and the insurgents’ operations on the civilian population. Though understaffed and underfunded, the creation of this cell

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11 “Making amends” is the emerging practice of warring parties providing recognition and assistance to civilians they harm within the lawful parameters of their combat operations. The practice of making amends to civilians suffering combat losses is a gesture of respect to victims. Amends can take a variety of forms, but must be culturally appropriate. They can include public apologies, monetary payments, livelihood assistance programs, and other offerings in accordance with victims’ needs and preferences. For more information, see chapter on Making Amends in this publication.

12 Civilian casualty recording, by contrast, describes efforts by states and civil society to record deaths from armed violence in a systematic and continuous way and is distinct from tracking and analysis of civilian harm by parties to a conflict. For more information, see chapter on Casually Recording in this publication.

13 Field liaison reports, battle damage assessments, and spot reports are reporting tools commonly used by military actors. Field liaison reports, for example, are generally from specific troops in the field who have been trained to feed up information regarding civilian harm. Battle damage assessments are investigations done by military actors to determine what type of civilian harm may have occurred as a result of an operation. Spot reports are the first data points communicated after a situation where troops may have engaged with hostile forces. These reports can form the foundation from which additional investigations and information gathering can take place.


15 Throughout history, militaries have often “counted” the deaths of their adversaries in order to measure progress toward mission success or inform military strategy to reduce the number of combat casualties. In contrast, the US army and Marine Corps began tracking military and civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq in order to hold commanders accountable and create an independent source of data for the public, and it is actually focused on all forms of civilian harm, including injury and loss of property, and analyzing data to inform better protection of civilians.
showed that ISAF recognized the importance of tracking civilian harm in a systematic way. In July 2011, ISAF created the Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team (CCMT) to oversee the CCTC and to analyze data gathered, identify civilian casualty trends, and advise the ISAF commander on ways to reduce civilian harm. This tracking mechanism was one of the first steps ISAF took to identify incidents of civilian harm, and it gathered important data that was analyzed, raising red flags about harmful trends. Information and analysis from the CCMT allowed commanders to make adjustments and issue tactical directives, resulting in a documented decrease in civilian casualties and in ways to better address harm caused.

The creation of these mechanisms also resulted in the first efforts to hold civil-military working groups in which civil society and ISAF could compare data and analysis. The working groups allowed civil society and military actors to have a constructive dialogue about casualties and other forms of civilian harm.

Somalia

In 2011 in response to several high profile cases of alleged civilian casualties, the African Union Mission in Somalia contracted a retired British general who in turn contacted the Center for Civilians in Conflict to consult with AMISOM on an indirect fire policy addressed to restrict the use of such fire in order to reduce civilian harm. The indirect fire policy (AMISOM 2011) recommended that AMISOM:

- Create a civilian casualty (CIVCAS) tracking cell, which collates all information from Operations, Intelligence, [Public Affairs], legal staff, Force Fire Directive Center and contingents to brief the Force Commander on the incidents. … This cell will investigate all incidents to enable accurate attribution of responsibility and AMISOM’s follow up. … The cell will also contribute to the [After Action Reviews] and lessons learnt process.16

The UN Security Council also recognized the importance of civilian casualty tracking in two subsequent resolutions. In extending its authorization for the AMISOM mission, the Security Council endorsed the tracking cell. Its 2013 resolution:

Recalls AMISOM’s commitment to establish a Civilian Casualty Tracking, Analysis, and Response Cell (CCTARC), underlines the importance of its establishment, requests AMISOM to report on the progress made in establishing the CCTARC, and requests partners to further support the establishment of a CCTARC.17

Over the course of 2012 and early 2013, AMISOM mapped out existing information systems and created an implementation plan for their CCTARC. At this writing, the CCTARC is being staffed up and should be operational in early 2013.

Conclusion

With any military mission—and especially those claiming civilian protection as their mandate—success can hinge on the ability and effort of the warring party to minimize civilian harm and respond to the harm that is caused. Expectations of protection among the civilian population are often high. A warring party must understand where, when, and how its operations have harmed civilians both to learn lessons that can prevent future harm to civilians and to address properly the harm that does occur.

For More Information


Making amends refers to the emerging practice of warring parties to recognize and provide assistance to civilians harmed within the scope of lawful combat operations. At its core, the practice of making amends to civilians who have suffered loss, injury, or other harm during armed conflict is a gesture of respect to victims and may help ameliorate their suffering. Amends can take a variety of forms, but must be culturally appropriate. They can include explanations, apologies, monetary payments, livelihood assistance programs, and other offerings in accordance with victims’ needs and preferences.

International humanitarian law and other legal frameworks have key rules in place to protect civilians in wartime, such as the requirement of proportionality of the use of force and the need to take all feasible precautions to minimize civilian harm. Warring parties are obliged to abide by these rules and conduct hostilities accordingly. Violation of these rules can result in a range of accountability measures, including international and national criminal prosecutions and reparations to victims. If use of lethal force was lawful, however, and there has been no identified violation of international humanitarian law, warring parties are under no legal obligation to help or even recognize the civilians who have suffered harm as a result of their operations.

Such civilian harm leaves victims themselves to recover from injuries and pick up the pieces of lost lives, property, and livelihoods. As a result, a family killed in the course of a proportionate attack on a legitimate military target has to undertake a sudden skirmish between opposing forces, or a farmer killed by a ricocheting bullet are all considered “collateral damage.” There is currently no obligation for the party responsible for the harm to help these civilians. This leaves civilians with no acknowledgment of their losses, no apology or explanation for what happened, and no assistance to cope with the loss.

Making amends fills a void in warring parties’ responsibilities and is a way to recognize and address the civilian suffering that results from their operations.

Basis for Making Amends

The principle of humanity in international humanitarian law is the foundational underpinning of making amends. The Martens Clause, which first appeared in the 1899 Hague Peace Convention and has been reiterated in many international humanitarian law instruments since, exemplifies how important humanity is to the laws of war.18 It states that, along with custom, “principles of humanity” and the “dictates of the public conscience” serve as sources of law in the absence of other international agreements.19 With no formal obligation for warring parties to recognize or help civilians considered “collateral damage” under international law, making amends promotes humanity by offering recognition and some degree of dignity to civilians suffering losses.

The principle of making amends also has roots in cultural traditions. For Pashtuns in Afghanistan under local customary law (Pashtunwali), the family of someone accidentally killed is entitled to compensation to ensure the honor of the victim. In Somalia, informal clan laws (xeer) require payment of “blood money” (diya) for civilian suffering. The Ugandan rite called mato oput restores community relations after intentional or accidental deaths. The clan of the person responsible must pay “blood money,” and a Council of Elders arranges for a reconciliation ceremony where animals are sacrificed as a reminder of a life lost. The rite “embodies the principle

16 AMISOM, Indirect Fire Policy, 2011 (on file with author).
that society and the perpetrator contribute to the extent possible to the emotional restoration and repair of the physical and material well-being of the victim.192

For warring parties that abide by an ethos of civilian protection while conducting combat operations, there are many reasons to make amends for the harm that they cause. First, making amends recognizes inherent human dignity. The act is a logical extension of civilian protection mores and could be called a moral imperative. Second, making amends entails addressing the loss and frustration of the local population. It can therefore be valuable as a measure for fostering trust and goodwill among the people. Finally, making amends can be a pragmatic step to further healing, stability, and reconciliation and thus constitute an effective peacebuilding measure.

Amends are beginning to be recognized at the United Nations. The 2010 and 2012 UN Reports of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict describe the making of amends as an emerging norm and “welcomed the practice.”211 The 2010 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions Philip Alston called on the international community to pay attention to the emerging practice of making amends and to study its significance.212

Reparations versus Amends

In contrast to amends, reparations are a legal remedy to which victims are entitled for violations of international human rights, humanitarian, and criminal law.213 Amends for incidental harm are not legally mandated for warring parties. The practice therefore comes from a policy decision rather than a legal obligation.

Amends and reparations do share similarities, however. Both concepts are rooted in principles of human dignity and humanity, which are universal to all victims regardless of how they have been harmed in armed conflict.

Furthermore, both amends and reparations can and should take a variety of forms, each of which should be sufficiently victim-centric. Reparations can take the form of financial redress such as compensation, as well non-financial redress such as rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition. Similarly, in practice, warring parties’ amends have ranged from monetary payments and in-kind assistance to apologies to victims. It is important to note that accepting amends does not disqualify victims from subsequently pursuing any applicable legal claims against a warring party for alleged violations of domestic or international law. Conversely, the provision of amends by a warring party is not prima facie evidence of legal liability for a violation.

Who Should Make Amends, and How?

As discussed above, making amends is rooted in the recognition of human dignity, and warring parties, out of a sense of ethical obligation, should provide some assistance to victims for incidental harm. In order to do so, warring parties, including non-state armed groups, should have policies and processes in place to respond to all civilian inclusive loss of life, injuries, and property damage. Warring parties should also make their policies and processes for making amends known to local governments, civil society, and civilians in theater so civilians know where to go and what to do if they have been harmed.

Since the nature of civil harm varies from conflict to conflict, and expectations of recognition and assistance differ from culture to culture, amends in practice must be both tailored to specific cases and culturally appropriate. In some cultures, monetary payments not accompanied by an apology, or vice versa, may be insulting.

The US military was the first among coalition partners to make “conciliation payments” in Iraq and Afghanistan for civilians harmed during combat operations.214 Other troop-contributing countries within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan also made monetary payments, provided medical assistance, and engaged in rebuilding efforts for civilians incidentally harmed during their combat operations. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has provided monetary payments for incidental harm caused by its actions in Somalia.

Separately, conflict-specific non-monetary schemes created and funded by the US government have also assisted victims of harm. The Afghan Civilian Assistance Program was established to assist Afghans who “have suffered losses as a result of US military operations against insurgents and the Taliban” in the country.215 It has offered assistance such as education and training, medical care, livestock provision, and infrastructure development. The program has been funded through appropriations from legislation that does not specifically address the legality of the US military attacks, but instead states that “funds shall be used for humanitarian and reconstruction assistance for the Afghan people including health and education programs, housing, to improve the living conditions of women, infrastructure, and assistance for victims of war and displaced persons.”216 In Iraq, the Marla Ruzicka Iraq War Victims Fund similarly has provided help to affected communities and families for rehabilitation and livelihood assistance programs.217 In Pakistan, the Conflict Victims Assistance Project, funded by the US government, helps the Pakistani government to prevent the so-called “victimization of the victims,” and to address the needs of conflict-affected families in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and since 2013 the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).218

Challenges

Changing the behavior of warring parties globally has its challenges. Identifying the real scope of the problem is a key challenge. The need for amends is clear in any given conflict, but difficult to measure with precision. How many civilians have been harmed in combat operations, and how many never received the amends they deserved? Indices of civilian suffering are subtle, and not all types of harm can be statistically recorded.219 The same challenges hold true for civilians who have already received amends: Were the amends enough, and by what measure? Do the recipients qualify for more? As with compensation payments for reparations, if amends are made for incidental harm, how is the loss valued? What is the appropriate methodology for answering these questions?

Another challenge is: what is an appropriate response to the harm? It is logical that as a dignifying gesture, amends should be tailored to the needs and wishes of civilian victims given their specific culture and traditions. It may also be that a civilian suffering loss may not want to receive a certain form of amends or any at all from the injurer. In Afghanistan, some civilians harmed felt insulted with just monetary payments and wanted, instead, a trial in a courtroom, even if the harm they suffered was not unlawful under the laws of war and their legal claim carried no weight.220 Relatedly, how does one expect a warring party to recognize and assist a civilian population perceived to be a subset of the enemy?

Conclusion

There is no consensus among warring parties about what constitutes amends, and addressing civilian harm in this way is still the exception rather than the rule in warfare. The examples of amends made and amends called for clearly show a specific set of practices beginning to develop. One instance of amends made will reveal their utility, adaptability, and moral power bolstering the call for future warring parties to follow suit. Each example also clarifies the content of the norm, exposing best or worst practices.

Essentially, making amends ensures that civilian victims, whether individuals, families, or entire communities, have their dignity and humanity respected, and through apologies, compensation, community aid, or in-kind assistance. One instance of making amends can change the destiny of a single family; the impact of all warring

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194 The 2010 report states, “I note the emerging practice of several States, one that other parties to armed conflict might consider, of acknowledging the harm they cause to civilians and compensating victims. The practice of making amends may range from public apologies to financial payments and livelihood assistance provided to individuals, families and communities. This practice must not be seen, however, as an alternative to prosecuting those responsible for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law and delivering justice to the victims and their families and communities.” UN Secretary-General, “Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict,” S/2012/376, November 11, 2012, http://reliefweb.int/node/1745447 (accessed January 23, 2015), para. 93.


196 Reparations fall under the rubric of transitional justice. For more information on reparations, see chapter on Transitional Justice in this publication.

197 US Army Regulation 27-20, para. 10, authorizes use of solieta payments as an expression of sympathy towards civilian victims or families for harm suffered, if culturally appropriate.


201 While capturing all instances is challenging, civilian harm tracking by warring parties can facilitate the collection of such data. For more information, see chapter on Civilian Harm Tracking in this publication.

202 Based on research by the Center for Civilians in Conflict in Afghanistan and in other theaters, it is useful, where feasible, to have the warring party meet in person or through a trusted intermediary with the victim to express sympathy and some form of empathy and to explain the consequences of the incidental harm although it may not completely change a victim’s perspective on judicial accountability.
parties making amends could change the outcome of war for civilians on a large scale. No amount or kind of amends by a warring party can wholly restore the lives of the victims of the conflict, but for civilians caught in the crossfire it is a chance for some kind of remedy.

For More Information


Simon Robins

The discourse of transitional justice has emerged as a response to the needs of societies emerging from conflict or political violence and has become a common lens through which to examine democratizing states. It is typified by institutional responses to violations of international humanitarian law, human rights law, or domestic law that occurred during a previous regime. Transitional justice emerged from a legal standpoint, and while emphasizing a prosecution-based response to violations, it depends on a broader understanding of the concept of justice that includes non-prosecutorial mechanisms. The goals of transitional justice include:

- Addressing the divisions in society that both caused the conflict and were created or deepened by the conflict;
- Seeking closure and healing wounds of both individuals and society at large through “truth telling”;
- Providing justice to victims, and making perpetrators accountable;
- Creating an accurate historical record for society;
- Restoring and strengthening the rule of law;
- Reforming institutions to promote democratization and human rights;
- Ensuring that human rights violations are not repeated; and
- Promoting national reconciliation, co-existence, and sustainable peace.

These aims target primarily broader societal goals, the objects of intervention typically being both the state and the nation. While transitional justice is about past events, it seeks to modify outcomes in the future, i.e., “to address the past in a constructive future-oriented manner.” The agenda of transitional justice in any particular context is of course highly contested, and there remain debates about who drives such processes and whose goals are or should be privileged. Transitional justice emerged in middle-income states emerging from authoritarianism, but its practice in the twenty-first century has become focused on post-colonial states with histories of inequality and poverty, addressing legacies of internal armed conflict.

Although a majority of its objectives do not prioritize victims or their needs, transitional justice has always claimed to have a victim orientation. It has been described as having a victim-centered approach, a term that emerged from the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Some experts have criticized the contention that transitional justice revolves around the interests of victims as largely rhetorical, while others claim that the broader goals of transitional justice demand that it look beyond those perceived as victims. Transitional justice has the potential to assist victims in several ways, not least by providing justice, truth, and reparations. Where victims’ needs align with what global practice seeks to deliver, transitional justice can ensure that perpetrators are tried and punished, violations become more difficult to deny, and the state provides both material and symbolic reparation. However, where victims’ needs go beyond these core “pillars” of transitional justice and, for example, call for addressing histories of exclusion and structural violence, transitional justice can be perceived as failing them. Transitional justice could more effectively serve victims if it ensured their participation in the process, offered them the promise of transformative change, and augmented victim-centered reparations.

Approaches to Transitional Justice
Contemporary literature on transitional justice has been dominated by two general orientations: a legalistic approach that is normatively driven, and a more pragmatically consequentialist approach, premised on achieving certain goals. The legalistic approach is based upon the primacy of a universal standard of justice, and is
characterized by an emphasis on judicial process to enforce international law. This approach has heavily influenced the human rights community and, in particular, international organizations (NGOs). It drove, for example, the campaign to create the International Criminal Court (ICC). The consequentialist approach stems largely from political realism, and it takes into consideration power relations in transition as well as the self-interest of elites in preventing retributive justice. Protagonists are more likely to believe that trials are not always feasible, given limiting political factors. Such an outlook is more likely to consider non-retributive mechanisms as an alternative route to justice, pending the possibility of prosecutions at some point in the future. Attempts to define transitional justice have traditionally been framed by these two approaches.10

Responsibility for and Scope of Transitional Justice

Transitional justice is guided by both a normative legal framework, deriving from public international law (most notably the bodies of human rights law and international criminal law), and a set of softer norms that have evolved in recent decades (e.g., the reports of the UN Secretary-General). These softer norms give the state the overriding responsibility for implementing transitional justice, supported by international actors and civil society. Given that many poor states emerging from conflict lack significant resources or expertise to design and implement such processes, international actors linked to Western donors, international agencies, and the United Nations have sometimes taken a leading role. As a result, the discourse of transitional justice refers far more to priorities that emerge from global norms than to those that arise in a particular time and place, located in the culture and society in which a victim lives.

In all contexts, the extent of any transitional justice process is limited by the political will of the leaders of the country and the processes have been influenced by the violence that preceded transition. Thus, there is often political resistance to such processes, especially around accountability mechanisms that could target those close to power. Early transitional justice processes were driven by truth commissions, on the understanding that in the delicate political environments in which they were unfolding justice was not—or at least not yet—possible. This approach reached its apogee with the much lauded South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Such processes are premised on the belief that the public telling of truth leads to healing for victims individually, and through the broader truths that emerge, healing and reconciliation for the nation as a whole. This notion has been called a “therapeutic ethic,”11 and in South Africa truth-telling was linked to a broad process of amnesty for violations.

In the two decades since the South African TRC, a new judicial absolutism has come to dominate transitional justice processes, with the idea of trading amnesty for truth being no longer perceived as appropriate. Indeed, amnesty for gross violations of human rights is often claimed to be in contravention of international legal norms. Contemporary transitional justice discourse perceives accountability for serious violations as a priority, as evidenced by the resources given to the ICC. Truth commissions have become sites of negotiation over the legacy of previous regimes. While reparation may be necessary for reparation, the process itself must be designed with a view to complement, or even drive, a prosecutorial process.

Defining Victims

In principle, victims are defined by what has been done to them, that is, by what violation of law they have suffered individually, and through the broader truths that violations of human rights in law, or serious violations of international humanitarian law, or through acts or omissions that constitute gross violations of international human rights law, or serious violations of international humanitarian law. Where appropriate, and in accordance with domestic law, the term “victim” also includes the immediate family or dependents of the direct victim.12

In practice, victimhood does not emerge naturally from the experience of being harmed, but is constructed socially and subjectively, with a range of factors determining who will be recognized as a victim. Most formally, bodies established to deal with victims, such as truth commissions or prosecutorial bodies, will determine who is considered a victim. In many contexts at the local level, victims’ groups and NGOs will engage with victims and define criteria that incorporate understandings of victimhood within communities. Often, however, such understandings are overly influenced by discourses external to communities and as a result they may or may not coincide with those of victims themselves. A political agenda or a certain narrative of the conflict may privilege a particular conception of victimhood. Victims constitute a part of the contested terrain of the memory of the conflict, at both national and local levels, often creating a hierarchy of victimhood.13

While the victim has become a central rationale for and moral driver of transitional justice processes globally, in many post-conflict interventions both the individual and collective consequences of violations on victims remain largely unexamined by either states or other actors promoting transitional justice, even as such processes unfold. In turn the effectiveness of transitional justice is understood not in terms of how it has affected victims, but in how it has more broadly a state move from violating or neglecting individuals’ rights to upholding them. That transitional justice practitioners are most concerned with judicial process and institutionally produced truth led them to focus on perpetrators and violations rather than on victims and the impacts on victims.

The Participation of Victims in Transitional Justice

Victims’ roles in transitional justice processes vary. In early transitional justice processes, victims were organized and mobilized to become major actors in the advocacy work that led to the implementation of mechanisms of truth and justice. The most notable example is that of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo of Argentina, mothers of those disappeared by the regime, whose demand for the truth about the disappeared led to the creation of CONADEP:14 one of the first truth commissions, tasked with recovering the truth concerning those missing. As transitional justice practice has become formalized, however, it has been more difficult for victims to influence such processes. In many low-income contexts where transitional justice is unfolding, victims are fetishized by civil society and authorities, invited to meetings and listened to respectfully as they give their testimony. However, significant control is rarely afforded to victims over agendas or funding. At its extreme, a conversation between government and elite civil society in the capital around mechanisms can effectively exclude victims’ voices. Consultation and outreach have become conventional indicators of inclusive process, with the opinions of victims and others being sought. However, such efforts are often perfunctory, and the results of such consultation rarely permitted to impact on processes that take place in accordance to a given political agenda. Consultation with victims has become a staple of the rhetoric of transitional justice, in practice a global mimetic model is often ill adjusted to victims’ priorities.

Many victims desperately demand that perpetrators be tried and punished and truth be told, but their agendas are still often according to a given political agenda. The situation of victims has been marginalized in favor of violations of civil and political rights. Furthermore, the nature of transitional justice mechanisms can serve to distance victims. In the prosecutions that have most defined transitional justice, the victim is a limited actor in a process that is often both alien and alienating, particularly for marginalized rural people with little engagement with officialdom. It is almost universally presumed that prosecutions help victims and that impunity is in itself traumatic for

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10 For example, Ruti Tavakoli gives a logical definition: “Transitional justice can be defined as the conception of justice associated with periods of political change.” Furthermore, the South African TRC’s report states: “No one can have the arrogance to define justice in such a way that it imposes upon people the consequences of their acts, but in how it has more broadly seen a state move from violating or neglecting individuals’ rights to upholding them.”


13 For example, Ruti Tavakoli gives a logical definition: “Transitional justice includes that set of practices, mechanisms and concerns that arise following a period of conflict, civil war or repression, and that are aimed at directly confronting and dealing with past violations of human rights and humanitarian law.”


survivors. The empirical evidence that the prosecutorial process is beneficial, however, remains unconvincing, and in many contexts the presumed primacy of prosecutions does not resonate with victims’ expressed needs. The truth commission has been widely lauded as “victim-centered” but is an institution that operates through the objectification of the victim to support the broader aims of the state: it is not clear that the victim, who is the essential performer in the exercise, truly benefits. The view of truth as reconciliation appears to be rooted in little empirically tested practice and there is some evidence that it can be either irrelevant to victims, or actively damaging and retraumatizing. For some, particularly those who have been victims of sexual violence, any public testimony risks retraumatization.

Where disempowerment is a major impact of victimhood, state-centered mechanisms in which victims have no agency risk perpetuating such disempowerment. There remains a need for both victim engagement and transitional justice processes to be empowering for victims, and this is likely to require the greater participation of victims in the design and development of such transitional processes. The route to empowerment is through victim mobilization, such that victims’ representatives can provide a connection between victims and those steering transitional justice processes.

Reparation as a Victim-Centered Process

In practice, transitional justice—increasingly involving lower-income states of the Global South—has come to describe institutional responses to violations, created by national elites and supported by an international community with an agenda of liberal statebuilding. As a result, the transitional justice processes of trials, truth commissions, and reparations that some victims want are often removed from the broader justice demands of victims who want all their rights to be respected and needs to be addressed.

From a victim perspective, this prescriptive approach has been criticized for:

- Seeking to ensure respect for rights often conceived in the abstract, rather than understanding and addressing the highly contextual concrete needs of victims;
- Prioritizing violations of civil and political rights rather than the social, economic, and cultural rights violations that are both the cause and result of conflict; and
- Failing to understand the particular specificities of any one context, and especially the contingency of victims’ needs.

Reparations processes are the one mechanism that are necessarily victim centered although they are rarely prioritized and often largely absent or token. When comprehensive, and well designed and implemented, a reparations process can address many of the needs of victims, both individually and collectively. A reparations process will ideally offer victims both acknowledgment and restitution, and can comprise compensation, rehabilitative support, such as medical and psychosocial, and symbolic reparation around memorialization. Guarantees of non-repetition are also an essential part of reparations, linking them to judicial and truth processes. The obligation of states to provide reparations to victims and principles on how this should be done are outlined in a number of international instruments, most notably the UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations. Despite such guidelines, however, reparation is often neglected entirely or recommended by truth commissions and others, but never implemented.

Toward a Transitional Justice that Better Serves Victims

The critiques outlined above suggest how transitional justice is failing to achieve its potential to serve victims of rights violations, even though it claims to place victims at the heart of its practice, and its stated goals resonate with what victims typically seek. Several areas emerge where transitional justice practice can be adapted to better serve victims.

Victim participation in transitional justice processes

Victims should ideally be actors at all stages of transitional justice, with their needs driving approaches taken. Involving victims will ensure that transitional justice processes address their needs and challenge prescriptive approaches that do not consider the nature of a specific context. Such involvement is likely to demand, first, that victims are mobilized in ways that allow the voices of ordinary victims to reach elites in the capital and, second, that those leading transitional justice processes are prepared for victims to be represented in all relevant institutions.

Transformative justice for victims

Rather than being driven purely by an agenda of building the institutions of the liberal state, transitional justice should also seek to address the disempowerment and exclusion that underlie victimhood in situations of political violence and situations that drive conflict. Transitional justice should not seek to restore victims to the poverty and marginalization that facilitated violations against them, but should strive to be transformative in challenging structural violence on the basis of ethnicity, locality, or gender.

Prioritization of the reparative agenda

Reparation remains the poor relation of transitional justice processes, with the recommendations of truth commission reports and other routes to reparation often frustrated by government refusal to implement them, or by a lack of resources. Reparation is the one transitional justice process that is intrinsically victim centered and advancing comprehensive reparations as a part of transitional justice is an effective way to address many victims’ needs.

For More Information


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VICTIM ASSISTANCE

Nerina Čevra

Assistance to victims has been promoted in different contexts, including the International Criminal Court, transitional justice initiatives, and programs to help victims of torture, crimes, and abuse of power. Perhaps the most holistic approach and one that aims at structural change (rather than individual responses) has emerged from the implementation framework of three weapons treaties: the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, 2003 Protocol V to the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) on Explosive Remnants of War (ERW)14, and, most recently, the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions. Under these instruments and associated documents, victim assistance has evolved from a voluntary endeavor, mainly sketching what donor assistance might look like, to a well-developed, analytical, and legally binding framework.

Within this framework, states have recognized that victim assistance is an “issue of human rights,”15 intended to enable survivors to maximize their potential as equal members of their societies in all areas of life. In the 15 years of implementation of the Mine Ban Treaty, states have defined priority areas for assistance based on the views and needs of survivors, including: emergency medical care, rehabilitation, psychological support, economic and social inclusion, data collection, and the development of relevant laws and policies.16 States have acknowledged that medical treatment alone is unlikely to allow survivors to reclaim their rightful place in society. Assistance measures must also address victims’ lack of access to adequate employment, to a means of providing for their families, and to conditions for participating in the life of the community. These measures should be grounded on reliable and relevant data collection.

The ultimate aim of victim assistance is to ensure the realization of the full range of victims’ human rights. It requires effective participation and inclusion of landmine and ERW survivors—including women, girls, men, and boys, and the families of those killed or injured—in the social, cultural, economic, and political life of their communities. This aim is consistent with one of the guiding principles of the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD): “full and effective participation and inclusion in society.”17

A Human Rights Approach

Rights-based victim assistance, as articulated in the Mine Ban Treaty and its implementing documents, applies states’ existing duty to ensure enjoyment of human rights to all persons in their jurisdiction or control, to the specific circumstances in which victims of landmines live. States have recognized that landmine survivors are a subgroup of persons with disabilities and mandated that victim assistance be provided in a way that does not discriminate among victims of different causes, or between victims and other persons injured or with disabilities.18

States applied this principle to cluster munitions victims and codified it in the Convention on Cluster Munitions.19 The following year, in the report of the Mine Ban Treaty’s 2009 review conference, states reaffirmed the importance of non-discrimination. The report states that “victim assistance efforts should promote the development of services, infrastructures, and policies to address the needs of all women, men, boys and girls with disabilities, regardless of the cause of the disability.”20 Moreover, the report emphasizes that “the circumstances and experience of all persons in vulnerable situations in mine-affected communities, including internally displaced persons, the elderly, people living in extreme poverty and other marginalised groups, should also be considered in victim assistance efforts.”21

A rights-based victim assistance framework guides states on how to meet the needs of a subgroup of the general population living in particularly vulnerable circumstances and facing barriers to inclusion and participation in society. States should incorporate victim assistance within the broader frameworks of human rights, development, and disability, in order to increase sustainability and efficacy.22

Definition of Victim

The Convention on Cluster Munitions was the first disarmament treaty to include a legally binding definition of the term “victim.” In Article 2(1), it states that:

“Cluster munition victims” means all persons who have been killed or suffered physical or psychological injury, economic loss, social marginalisation or substantial impairment of the realisation of their rights caused by the use of cluster munitions. They include those persons directly impacted by cluster munitions as well as their affected families and communities.23

This treaty’s definition draws on the UN General Assembly definition of victims of violations of human rights and humanitarian law that appears in the 2006 Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation. That document defines victims as:

persons who individually or collectively suffer harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that constitute gross violations of international human rights law, or serious violations of international humanitarian law. Where appropriate, and in accordance with domestic law, the term “victim” also includes the immediate family or dependants of the direct victim and persons who have suffered harm in intervening to assist victims in distress or to prevent victimization.24

An identical or similar version is included in other international instruments, including documents implementing recent disarmament treaties.25

These definitions share three main elements. First, a victim has experienced harm, which can vary in nature from physical injury to emotional suffering, economic loss, or the impairment of fundamental rights. Second, victims include not only persons who were the direct target of the violation but also other affected persons, such as family members. Third, the harm can be of a type experienced by an individual, or by a particular group, such as a group targeted by genocide.26

The expansiveness of the definition of “victim” highlights the full breadth of victimization caused by landmines and ERW. For example, more than a decade of efforts to assist individual antipersonnel landmine victims, the states parties to the Mine Ban Treaty agreed in 2009 that victim assistance-related efforts should accord more attention to the impact on the family of those killed or injured, particularly in areas such as psychological support, economic empowerment, and support for the education of children.27

15 ibid., para. 116.
21 Ibid., paras. 66-67.
27 Ibid., para. 116.
Addressing the rights and needs of both the individual and the family of those killed or injured has the potential to have greater impact on the ground and to improve victims’ daily lives and overall well-being. The attention to the individual and family is consistent with the approach taken by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The preamble of the CRPD promotes the understanding that “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State, and that persons with disabilities and their family members should receive the necessary protection and assistance to enable families to contribute towards the full and equal enjoyment of the rights of persons with disabilities.”

A focus on the individual and the family should not be seen as ignoring the broader definition of “victim,” which includes the affected community. The community is the indirect beneficiary of victim assistance-related efforts that improve infrastructure and services and the direct beneficiary of landmine and ERW clearance and ERW risk education activities. Addressing the full breadth of victimization caused by landmines and ERW on communities also requires strengthening the links between mine action and development.

The evolution of disability discourse suggests that the more empowering term “survivor” should normally be used in relation to those individual women, girls, men, and boys who have survived a landmine or ERW accident. Several factors have led to the ongoing use of the term “victim” in instruments of international humanitarian law, but civil society actors who are very active in this area tend to use both “victim” and “survivor.”

State Responsibility for Victim Assistance

Under international law, states bear the primary responsibility for assisting victims in their jurisdiction or control. States often have such a duty to victims by virtue of their obligation to ensure the full enjoyment of human rights of all persons in their jurisdiction or control. In addition, according to various international frameworks for cooperation and assistance, other states are required to support the domestic efforts of affected states. Notably, the international community as a whole also has the obligation under the UN Charter to cooperate and assist states in meeting their human rights duties. The most recent disarmament treaties, including the Mine Ban Treaty, CCW Protocol V, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, codify the obligation of international cooperation and assistance into a legally binding framework for assistance to a group living in vulnerable circumstances.

A number of actors have a role to play in addressing the rights and needs of landmine and ERW victims, including the United Nations and other international, regional, and nongovernmental organizations. However, relevant ministries of the affected state must be at the forefront of efforts to enhance coordination and to avoid duplication of efforts. With this in mind, states agreed to specify in the Convention on Cluster Munitions that states should implement their victim assistance obligations by, among other things, ensuring they have a focal point within the government for coordination of efforts on this front.

The key components of victim assistance—emergency and continuing medical care, physical rehabilitation, psychological and psychosocial support, social and economic inclusion, data collection, and laws and policies—all fall within the mandates of various state ministries.

For example:

1. **Emergency and continuing medical care** falls under the mandate of a ministry of health. In most states, a plan of action has been developed for the healthcare sector to promote the good health of the population. To guarantee the rights and meet the needs of landmine and ERW victims, it is essential that these plans address emergency response capabilities and trauma care, and establish well-equipped facilities, with skilled healthcare providers at all levels, that are appropriate and accessible for persons with traumatic injuries and disabilities, and in close proximity to affected areas.

2. **Physical rehabilitation** usually falls under the mandate of a ministry of health but can also involve other ministries such as those with responsibility for social affairs, education, livelihoods, and war veterans. Some states have developed a multi-sectoral rehabilitation plan to promote the physical well-being of the population, including persons with disabilities. To guarantee the rights and meet the needs of landmine and ERW survivors, it is essential that plans adopt a multidisciplinary approach to the provision of appropriate services. They should also include such objectives as the provision, maintenance, and repair of assistive devices and establishment of well-equipped facilities, with skilled rehabilitative care personnel at all levels, that are appropriate and accessible for persons with disabilities.

3. **Psychological and psychosocial support** may fall within the mandate of several ministries including those with responsibility for health, rehabilitation, social affairs, education, livelihoods, and war veterans. Formal and informal support may involve a wide range of actors including doctors, nurses, psychologists, other healthcare professionals, rehabilitation specialists, social workers, teachers, employment advisors, disability rights experts, community support groups, and survivors themselves. To guarantee the rights and meet the needs of landmine and ERW survivors, appropriate psychological and psychosocial support from suitably qualified personnel should be available and accessible at all stages of recovery and reintegration and in close proximity to affected areas.

4. **Social and economic inclusion** may fall within the mandate of ministries with responsibility for such issues as labor, vocational training, education, sports, social welfare, and war veterans. To guarantee the rights and meet the needs of landmine and ERW survivors, plans and policies should take into account the special needs of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, programs to improve the social and economic status of survivors and their families should be available and accessible and in close proximity to affected areas.

5. **Data collection** provides the foundation for the development of services and programs. Several ministries may have different mechanisms to gather information about the population, including landmine and ERW victims. For example, a ministry of health may have a hospital information system or a national injury surveillance mechanism. A ministry with responsibility for social affairs or war veterans may have a system to record information on those accessing services. A ministry with responsibility for planning may conduct a national census. To ensure that a national injury information system captures as complete a picture as possible, such a system could include the category of mine or ERW incident as a cause of injury.

**The Role of Victims in Victim Assistance**

The principle of participation and inclusion is well understood in the context of the Mine Ban Treaty, CCW Protocol V, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, with states parties to each adhering to the message of “nothing about us without us.” The participation of persons with disabilities, including landmine and ERW survivors, in all aspects of planning, coordination, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of activities that affect their lives is essential. The CRPD makes clear that persons with disabilities shall be consulted and involved in the development and implementation of measures necessary to implement the convention. Survivors and other persons with disabilities have a unique perspective on their own situation and needs. Survivors can and should be constructive partners in all victim assistance efforts. For victims, full and effective participation and inclusion goes beyond being consulted and participating in meetings. Inclusion is a much broader concept that involves providing opportunities for everyone to participate in the most appropriate manner possible. It may require adapting the environment to suit the individual or providing services such as physical rehabilitation, education, or psychological support to facilitate equal access to the social, cultural, economic, and political life of the community.
Gaps and Challenges
The main challenges to victim assistance lie in three areas:

- The scope and application of the relevant legal frameworks,
- The overlap among legal frameworks, and
- The capacity of states to meet their human rights obligations to individuals within their jurisdiction or control.

Scope and Application
There are two limitations to the scope and application of victim assistance. First, the victim assistance obligations imposed on states parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions do not touch upon civil and political rights, access to justice, or due process. Article 5(1) of the convention provides:

> Each State Party with respect to cluster munition victims in areas under its jurisdiction or control, shall, in accordance with applicable international humanitarian and human rights law, adequately provide age- and gender-sensitive assistance, including medical care, rehabilitation and psychological support, as well as provide for their social and economic inclusion. 73

While it is appropriate that the Convention on Cluster Munitions does not create new rights, but refers to ones existing in international human rights law, the omission of practical obligations related to the protection and promotion of civil and political rights prevents full recovery of victims. This element should be incorporated into victim assistance program design.

Second, the major source of hard victim assistance obligations is currently weapon-specific treaty regimes, namely the Mine Ban Treaty, CCW Protocol V, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions. For this reason, they ostensibly only arise with respect to a narrow group of victims: victims of landmines and ERW, including cluster munitions. To address this limitation in part, the Convention on Cluster Munitions includes a context-specific non-discrimination principle. The treaty provides that, in fulfilling their victim assistance obligations, states parties:

[shall] not discriminate against or among cluster munition victims, or between cluster munition victims and those who have suffered injuries or disabilities from other causes; differences in treatment should be based only on medical, rehabilitative, psychological or socio-economic needs. 74

The question arises as to how victim assistance obligations from a weapon-specific treaty regime can ensure that an elevated class of victims is not created. A dedicated international framework applicable to assistance of all victims of armed violence could minimize this threat. Such a framework should serve the ultimate end of ensuring equal access to the same quality of services and infrastructure, regardless of location, which in turn would allow victims of armed violence the opportunity to realize their full range of rights.

Overlapping Frameworks
Victim assistance has evolved from one treaty to the next. However, in terms of actual legal obligation, the prior articulations are not superseded since they cover different subject matter, that is, different weapons. As a result, victim assistance remains somewhat piecemeal, as a weapon-by-weapon obligation and conception. It is unclear how well conceptions of victim assistance in different treaties coordinate with one another. The questions of which body of law (international human rights or humanitarian law) applies in a given context and how it applies may also complicate this dynamic.

Capacity and Resources
With the realities of post-conflict resource deficits in affected states, and the creation of a strong international framework for inter-state cooperation and assistance, the implementation of victim assistance depends significantly on external funding. Although there has been a strong focus on the capacity of national institutions to meet the needs of victims and thus fulfill hard obligations, limited resources pose a persistent challenge in any expansion of victim assistance to all victims of armed violence.

Conclusion
It is important to place victim assistance within a larger picture of other mechanisms and approaches to addressing civilian harm, including amends, transitional justice, and even traditional reparations. Unlike the other approaches discussed in this publication, victim assistance has largely avoided the involvement of states or actors responsible for the initial harm. This is in part for strategic reasons, considering that the legal framework was contained in a treaty and required the full agreement of state signatories. Nevertheless, it would be worth exploring whether, drawing from the practices of making amends and transitional justice, there should be a greater role for states and actors responsible for the initial harm.

For More Information


73 Convention on Cluster Munitions, art. 5(1).
74 Ibid., art. 5(2)(e).
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Over the past two decades, there has been a growing movement to address the needs of civilians harmed in armed conflict and armed violence. Those who work in the field share the aim of alleviating human suffering, and their achievements show that this moral imperative has become a legal and policy priority. Differences among their approaches are evident, however.

*Acknowledge, Amend, Assist* examines five methods used to mitigate the harm to civilian victims: casualty recording, civilian harm tracking, making amends, transitional justice, and victim assistance. The publication strives to increase understanding of the strategies, their commonalities and differences, and the difficulties they face individually and collectively.

The approaches share many overarching principles as well as the goal of helping victims. They generally define “victim” broadly, envision a wide range of support, encourage victim participation in the process, and aim to address victims’ needs. They recognize that even if one party bears primary responsibility for providing assistance, in practice there will be multiple players involved.

The approaches also diverge on several counts. They target either lawful or unlawful harm, assign responsibility for providing assistance to different parties, call for various forms of recognition and aid, and have distinct underpinnings. The role of law in addressing the needs of victims is another subject open to debate.

This publication originated in a two-day summit held at Harvard Law School in October 2013. The summit provided an opportunity for experts to explore the challenges of meeting victims’ needs and to learn about where their work might coincide and/or conflict. This complementary publication seeks to present the issues to a wider audience. It constitutes a first step in forging an ongoing dialogue about how better to address civilian harm.