

Ladies and gentlemen,

My name is Zeljko Volas and I am a landmine survivor from Bosnia and Herzegovina. I speak to you in dual capacity, first as a survivor of landmine injury and also as a person who helps other survivors to overcome the victim phase and become equal citizens of their communities. I work as an Outreach worker in a non-governmental organization and I provide peer support to other landmine survivors, their families and their communities in the recovery from trauma, realization of their rights and return to a productive life.

“It’s very difficult to feel different from others. During the time in which I was a victim I felt so different, everyone was looking at me strangely.”

After I experienced trauma and survived the landmine incident and received medical care, I had to do the following:

1. Face facts – that I don’t have my left leg below the knee.
2. Decide what direction I wish to take – I chose the life direction, which spearheaded positive change in my own daily life.
3. Reach out for support – I looked for way to get engaged and again become part of the community where I live and I received the needed support from the non-governmental sector – I started working in a position which enabled me to strengthen and encourage other landmine survivors through peer support and accompanying them on the road to becoming equal members of their communities.
4. Get moving – I got an opportunity to pursue higher education and to motivate other changes in the community through projects in the area of culture and ecology.
5. Give back to the community – is exactly what I am doing here in front of all of you and my friends landmine survivors so that they can be catalysts for positive change in their lives and communities.

I come from a country with a complicated political-administrative structure. As a consequence the same rights of persons with disabilities are treated differently depending on where they live. This is basis for unequal status and discrimination within a group that is already discriminated as a whole – landmine survivors and persons with disabilities.

Allow me to say that I was lucky to build myself back through support I received, but you should know that a large number of survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries around the world still do not have and are not given an opportunity to build their own capacity and to be the leaders for positive change in their communities, and through that to become equal citizens and are respected by their families and their surroundings.

Program for support for landmine survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been developed since the beginning in close cooperation between the government and non-governmental sector. Such approach resulted in significant achievements, but a lot is left to do in order to fully reintegrate landmine survivors in the community as full and equal

members. My experiences in working with survivors reveals that a large number of those injured by landmines still live in the victim phase – without capacity, resources nor adequate support to confront their own trauma and start moving toward recovery.

In the domain of physical rehabilitation, survivors most often do not have the right to choose the producer and the quality of prosthetic devices, nor do they have information available. Lack of appropriate prosthetic/orthotic assistive devices bring persons with disabilities results in additional isolation, inability to use the remaining abilities, and unequal participation in all aspects of public and private life. The deadline approved by government institution for obtaining orthopedic assistive devices, which is very long – 4 years, leaving survivors without opportunity to regularly change their prosthesis. In turn, the health of the person using such prosthesis suffers.

It is also essential to promote and integrate peer support programs in the work with landmine survivors. Based on my own experience I know that this is an effective, implementable and speedy way toward recovery. I personally believe that by integrating peer support in the support programs on the national level would ensure transfer of knowledge and positive practices from the non-governmental organization to the governmental health sector with the goal of providing the highest quality services for the recovery of landmine survivors.

Programs for economic support and strengthening their economic power represents a key segment in the recovery of landmine survivors. They will increasingly feel useful and a return to belonging to their families, communities and most of all us ourselves.

However, in order to ensure progress in the above mentioned challenges, it is necessary to address other questions which are relevant not only for landmine survivors, but persons with disabilities more generally, in a systematic way. That means we need a broad framework in order to create progress. That framework is called the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Therefore, in the week where we are marking the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, I would like to remind you of importance of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as the highest standard for human rights of persons with disabilities and the most appropriate framework for implementation of assistance to victims of landmines.

Thank you!