

Relevance of CBR for the Asia-Pacific Region

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ABSTRACT

While the focus of CBR action is at the community level, it is pertinent to note some of the Asia-Pacific region's overall development trends. In an interconnected world, these trends have significant implications for the practice of CBR and its advancement in the region.

This paper discusses how CBR could give impetus to a community-supported self-help movement for change. The paper presents seven prisms for a kaleidoscopic view to highlight some parameters that are unique to the Asia-Pacific scenario for CBR. The relevance of CBR for this region is discussed in relation to two groups of issues: the first refers to chronic issues of poverty, hunger and inequalities; and the second, to dramatic emerging challenges, from urbanisation to the current economic scenario.

Key words: CBR, Asia-Pacific

INTRODUCTION

The CBR Guidelines launched in 2010 promotes community based rehabilitation (CBR) as a comprehensive strategy for implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

CBR today refers to the vision, principles and approach captured in the new CBR Guidelines.

This includes the five components of the CBR Matrix. The first four components, namely, health, education, livelihood and social inclusion, relate to key development sectors. The fifth component, empowerment, is fundamental to ensuring access to the development sectors, and to the rights and quality of life of persons with disabilities.

As CBR is a multisectoral development strategy, this paper discusses its relevance for Asia-Pacific in relation to two groups of issues: the first refers to chronic

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issues of poverty, hunger and inequalities; and the second to dramatic emerging challenges, from urbanisation to the current economic scenario.

These issues have implications for shaping CBR programmes in the Asia-Pacific region, which is unique in many ways, not least in terms of its enormous population base. This is the region where one thinks of CBR in terms of 650 million persons with disabilities, plus their families and communities.

The very nature of CBR, which emphasises creativity, participatory methods and problem solving, and its openness to a plurality of models, renders it well suited to this, the most diverse region in the world.

Poverty and Food Insecurity

The new CBR Guidelines contains a powerful methodology for reducing poverty.

It is exciting because of the promise that it holds for nearly two billion people who survive on less than \$2 a day; they are the majority of the world's poor and they live in the Asia-Pacific region.

The poor are more affected by disability than better-resourced groups. In much of this region, the disability that affects the poor is to a great extent preventable. It is linked with public health limitations and hazardous conditions that they are more exposed to. For example, in the Asia-Pacific area, nearly two billion people have no access to basic sanitation. Almost 500 million people are without safe drinking water. Thus, without adequate sanitation and safe drinking water, the poor are at a high risk of food insecurity.

Dramatic food price increases have created havoc for poor households. In a region so admired for its economic growth, some 600 million people are hungry. Many of them live in net "food surplus" countries. Hunger is a problem of inequitable access to food, rather than mere production shortfall.

CBR, with its emphasis on entitlements and rights, is indeed relevant in the poverty context of the Asia-Pacific.

Some may however contend that over 500 million people have risen above extreme poverty. Unfortunately they remain moderately poor. Even in many middle-income countries, the working poor are plagued by problems of low wages, low-quality employment and no social protection.

Persons with disabilities, when employed, are more likely to be in the informal

sector. Informal employment means no job security, no protection from hazardous working conditions and no disability benefits.

The Livelihood component has a special role in addressing these challenges, building on gains made in the other components.

Inequalities

The Empowerment component is of particular significance, not just for persons with disabilities and their families, but for entire communities. This is because within Asia-Pacific, the gulf between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is widening. There are growing inequalities of access to basic social services, to incomes and to assets.

Many countries are still a long way from ensuring that children with disabilities have the healthy and nurturing environment that they need for optimum growth and development.

Self-help group formation, social mobilisation, political empowerment, and advocacy, which are key elements of the Empowerment component, have an important role in tackling the disparities that erode social cohesion.

Urbanisation

The Asia-Pacific region has some emerging parameters that underscore the relevance of CBR.

Asia is urbanising rapidly. Over half of the region's urban residents live in small and medium cities, defined as areas with less than one million people. People in small cities are benefiting from the trend towards decentralisation. Political and administrative power is devolving to local authorities.

However, small cities still suffer from poor services and infrastructure. Hence, there is a need for CBR that can advocate the improvement of services and infrastructure, increasing their accessibility in small and medium cities of the region.

In contrast, megacities have populations of 10 million or more. Of the 21 megacities in the world, 12 are in Asia. Manila is a megacity, as also Delhi.

Urban Asians tend to live in very crowded cities. There are over 500 million slum dwellers in the Asia-Pacific region. Most of them are in South Asia and East Asia.

Internal migration, natural increase and spatial expansion drive the growth of megacities.

In the process, many poor people face serious issues of displacement from their land and loss of their traditional sources of livelihood. Workers on the bottom rungs of urban economies struggle with declining real wages and increasing working hours which deepen their hardship.

The rapid urbanisation under way in Asia-Pacific makes for instability in the community and family context of persons with disabilities. This situation, affecting such huge numbers of persons with disabilities and their families, must be urgently addressed using CBR methodology.

Non-communicable Diseases

With exploding urban populations, the urban poor face worsening health conditions. CBR, with its health promotion and advocacy elements, can do much to tackle the silent pandemic of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) wrought by changes in lifestyle and food habits.

NCDs have become a leading preventable cause of disability. The rise of NCDs among poor and vulnerable groups is widening health inequities within countries, and between countries. The problems are affecting progressively younger age groups, creating a significant impact on the workforce, on economic loss for families and on overall development.

Among ageing populations, much of the disease burden results from chronic NCDs that are difficult and expensive to treat.

CBR practitioners can, through health promotion advocacy, community engagement and multisectoral collaboration, contribute to preventing up to 80 per cent of all cases of heart disease, diabetes and stroke, as well as 40 per cent of cancers.

Disasters and Climate Change

The time has come to integrate CBR in disaster risk reduction.

The recent severe flooding in South Asia and South-East Asia are harsh wake-up calls on climate change. They are the price paid for upstream decisions that favour the short-term profit of the few over long-term impact on the many. Also burned into the collective memory are images of massive devastation in the aftermath of recent earthquakes and tsunamis in this region.

Indeed, the geographic, population density and poverty characteristics of Asia-Pacific render it the region most adversely affected by disasters. In 2010, nearly 90 per cent of all people affected by disasters were in Asia-Pacific. Over 30 million people were displaced into joblessness, landlessness, homelessness, and food and health insecurity.

Community organising and multisectoral collaboration that are central to CBR, underscore its relevance for enabling the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of disaster risk reduction.

CBR should be linked with the Hyogo Framework for Action, to build disability-inclusive community resilience to disasters. For that, the window of opportunity is now, as work starts towards revising the Hyogo Framework in 2015.

Demographic Transition

Never before in the history of Asia-Pacific has its population aged as fast as at present. Nor have there ever been so many older persons in these societies. By 2050, one in four people in the region will be over 60 years old. In East and North-East Asia, and parts of South-East Asia, 30 to 40 per cent of the population will be more than 60 years of age by 2050, making it the most drastic demographic transformation in the world.

Increasingly, every household and every community will have to grapple with the realities of rapid ageing, namely, impairments associated with old age. Along with that comes the need for accessibility, appropriate assistive devices, living arrangements, and care and support services.

To address the region's ageing and disability issues, CBR must have a long-term perspective aimed at healthy ageing and adding life to years.

Economic Challenges

The economic scenario in the region has implications for CBR resources and opportunities.

There are 33 middle-income countries in Asia-Pacific. The middle class has emerged as a new force here. It is estimated that this region could have more middle-class consumers by the end of this decade than the rest of the world combined.

CBR practitioners may well ask: "How can CBR harness the power of the growing Asia-Pacific middle class?"

Despite the glow of economic success, there is no room for complacency.

Asia-Pacific is part of the deepening financial and market integration of the global economy, achieved over previous decades. Thus, the overall economic environment of Asia-Pacific is vulnerable to global crises. The prolonged Euro zone debt crisis and the US budgetary crisis have already begun to hit export-driven economies in this region.

There is a looming danger of bubble economies bursting. The outlook for employment growth is poor across many countries, despite national variations.

The adverse impact on this region of the global economic downturn and uncertain economic outlook, presents new challenges that will shape CBR.

The depth of the global economic crises to which Asia-Pacific is exposed and the expectation that they may be long drawn out, possibly even chronic, demand rigorous questioning of how this could have happened. In doing so, the moral imperative for value-based change comes to the fore. CBR has the potential to provide a moral compass to help society reinstate values lost in the pursuit of growth that is disempowering and inequitable. CBR action could help transform the systems and processes of society so that persons with disabilities may participate like everyone else. When that happens, everyone benefits.

Asia-Pacific has a rich heritage of values and practices for community self-reliance and balanced resource use. *Gotong royong* (a concept of reciprocity or mutual help, common in Indonesia and Malaysia) and *saemaul undong* (an integrated rural development movement initiated in the Republic of Korea and based on the spirit of diligence, self-help and cooperation) are just two examples.

These cultural resources lend themselves to CBR. They could give fresh impetus to a community-driven, self-help movement for change. This would take us one step closer to correcting a skewed development path that has left in its wake so much inequality and pain.

CONCLUSION

There is just one coherent message embedded in what is discussed in this paper. To make it explicit:

1. The process of development of the past few decades has increased inequality in the Asia-Pacific region, as it has in other parts of the world, hitting hardest those living in poverty, and especially persons with disabilities.

2. The current global economic crisis could potentially impact on Asia-Pacific, and probably not in a positive way for the poor.
3. Problems like climate change, disasters, water shortage and population ageing, can only exacerbate the situation of those living in deprivation.
4. In the present circumstances, as has been the case for decades, the only solution for the poor is collective self-reliance and resilience, based on the traditions of the region like *gotong royong* or *saemaul undong* CBR is precisely such an approach for persons with disabilities, their families and communities.
5. In addressing development issues, be they chronic ones like poverty and inequality, or dramatic, newer challenges such as urbanisation and population ageing, CBR could catalyse a new era of community action for inclusive growth and sustainability.

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