

Editorial

An earlier editorial commented on the differences between developing and developed countries in terms of the context and baseline for development of community-based rehabilitation (CBR) policy and practice. Continuing on the same theme, it is interesting to note that despite differences in services, systems and resources to promote inclusion, there are some commonalities between these countries, along with some lessons from CBR practice from developing countries.

With recent economic downturns and recession, many developed countries are facing cuts in welfare spending, including for programmes for persons with disabilities. Because of this, the philosophy of CBR – “from welfare and charity to inclusive development and self-reliance” - assumes significance for these countries. However, what is debatable is that after raising expectations with the previously higher welfare spending, it may become more difficult to promote self-reliance. Conversely one can argue that in developing countries with low resources and limited allocations for welfare, expectations are low and hence it could be relatively easier to promote self-reliance, as CBR programmes have been doing over these past two decades.

Although developed countries have better services, systems and resources for implementation of laws and policies to promote inclusion, the recent decreases in welfare budgets have brought to the fore many planning and management issues that CBR programmes in developing countries have already been grappling with, and that have lessons for developed countries. These include, for example, how to manage with limited financial and skilled human resources; how to define what is the “optimum quality” of services to aim for, based on the needs and available resources in a given context; how to plan for multi-sectoral collaboration, especially between health, education and welfare sectors (which remains a continuing challenge in developing countries); how to promote government-civil society partnerships; and how to ensure on-going awareness programmes for key stakeholders, especially government at different levels.

Working with persons with disabilities and their associations, to build capacity towards self-reliance is a major focus of CBR. In addition, the lessons from CBR experiences underscore the importance of working with family groups to raise

awareness, combat negative attitudes and to provide mutual emotional and psychological support between members.

The 'community' and its participation are an important pillar for any CBR programme. A key lesson from CBR practice in developing countries is the necessity to be realistic about community participation, instead of harbouring romanticised, idealistic beliefs about 'the community'. Even in rural areas in developing countries where communities are usually viewed as open and welcoming, there are places where communities are 'closed' and not helpful. CBR experiences have shown that in some places, the community was primarily mothers of children with disabilities. It has sometimes been commented that promoting community participation is a way for governments to justify lower spending on welfare. Developed countries may also face similar challenges in addressing community participation.

Whatever the context in any country, CBR implementers have understood the importance of defining 'the community' in their programmes, for example, is it persons with disabilities, or families, or volunteers, or other stakeholders. Equally important is the use of community development principles, where communities identify their common issues of concern and try to find solutions in a collective manner, to promote self-reliance. Another lesson is that working with other marginalised groups in the community can help to develop a more effective and collective voice towards community based inclusive development.

To conclude, although CBR was started as a strategy that was applicable to developing countries, there are increasing indications of how lessons from CBR experiences can be of significance to developed countries as well, especially in the light of economic problems faced by some of these countries.

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