

UNPAID CBR WORK FORCE: BETWEEN INCENTIVES AND EXPLOITATION

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ABSTRACT

The notion of 'unpaid CBR work force', the so-called 'volunteers' in CBR, can create several problems because of the financial situation of most of the 'volunteers' who are dependent on paid work. This article illustrates the shortcomings of the WHO Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) model with regard to the 'unpaid CBR work force'.

INTRODUCTION

Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) is a popular instrument for rehabilitation of people with disabilities in the 'majority world' (this term is used here instead of 'third world' and other similar terms). According to this concept developed by WHO and widely implemented since the 1980s, people with disabilities remain in their personal living environment instead of being rehabilitated in institutions. Local members of each community (a social group that is dynamic and heterogeneous) are selected to work as 'community workers'. They are then trained within a short time to teach family members on how to provide assistance to their relatives with disabilities. Helander (1) describes the role of 'community workers'. After assessing people with disabilities in the community, a rehabilitation programme is developed for them. This is followed by instructions to family members of disabled people, the 'family trainers'. 'Family trainers' carry out rehabilitative measures with their family members who have disabilities on a regular basis. They receive information on how to support their relatives with disabilities on their own. Among numerous supportive measures learned during this phase, some include learning of sign language and the use of cane by visually impaired persons for walking. Helander also goes on to promote further supportive measures for community workers that are not illustrated in detail here.

WHO views family trainers and community workers as 'volunteers' who make up the largest part of the unpaid CBR work force. In one of the CBR programmes in Afghanistan there were 2000 unpaid CBR workers while it had only 400 paid workers (2). According to the author, Helander's use of the term 'volunteers' can be misleading. For this group of workers this article uses the term 'unpaid CBR work force' instead. Deepak and Sharma note that many community workers involve in CBR in the hope of eventually receiving a salary (3). This is not surprising if one considers the poverty in the majority world. To speak of a substantially large voluntary work force in a CBR is therefore entirely unrealistic. The term

'unpaid CBR work force' referring to 'volunteers', comprises of a large spectrum of different identities and roles. They include those who work for CBR without receiving a salary and those who receive compensation that may range from being able to access a credit or earn a small salary. The UN organisations provide only vague statements regarding payment of unpaid CBR work force. In the 'Joint Position Paper' (4) the issue of payment of community workers is left open: 'Community CBR workers may be employed within the sector that provides the framework for CBR. They can also be volunteers working in co-operation with other community workers who are employed'.

How do people volunteer to work in CBR although they do not receive any payment? Helander (5) seems to be aware that the results of a CBR programme depend largely on the motivation of the unpaid CBR work force. To reach this end he fashioned the idea of providing incentives. Such incentives include participation in an official ceremony, receipt of uniforms, food, livestock, land or a written statement from an important person that help him in his career prospects, award of an official document such as a diploma or participation in seminars and so on (1). At first glance, it does not seem possible that these incentives can influence the participants to such an extent that they would be willing to commit themselves as unpaid CBR work force for numerous hours every week. However, reports show that they are quite effective in practice and that participation of volunteers as unpaid CBR work force is partly influenced by these incentives (6).

Although incentives achieve their goal partly, it is still a questionable method to use. A discussion of incentives described in the 'Joint Position Paper' will illustrate this point (4). Annual competitions for the best community worker or the distribution of uniforms are two of the incentives suggested in this report. They are expected to help ensure participation of CBR workers. It is debatable however if unpaid CBR work force will be able to gain adequate recognition and respect through these measures. Dealing with them in this manner suggests that they are taken lightly. Even though incentives and their effects are culturally dependent and can result in different outcomes in different cultures, they also appear to be a method of exploitation of the unpaid CBR work force. The strenuous work of CBR workers is compensated in a dubious manner, and in most cases they do not even receive a salary. This happens because of the assumption that CBR can not be implemented without 'volunteers', a form of cheap unpaid work force (7).

Despite the fact that incentives may have a motivating effect for the unpaid CBR work force to participate in CBR, their effect seems to be limited. In practice there are difficulties such as finding willing community workers, high dropout rates and lack of motivation among unpaid CBR work force (3). Further overriding difficulties could also exist beyond these problems. Many community workers are expected to participate in additional programmes. In Krefting and Lysacks's study (6) carried out in Indonesia, 80% of the unpaid CBR force

was involved in other programmes. Consequently, they had limited amount of time and energy to invest in the CBR programme. Many community workers who work full-time in the hope of receiving a salary could view the unpaid work for CBR as a form of exploitation (8). It is not surprising that many of them may eventually leave the programme because they are unable to fulfil their expectations of receiving a payment. Poverty seems to be the major obstacle for unpaid work in CBR programmes. Willingness to engage in unpaid work is less with reduced salary (9). Thomas and Thomas (10) believe that most people cannot afford to work without pay in the 'majority world'. Before community workers can afford to work for CBR, other acute needs, such as the ability to feed one's own family must be fulfilled. Due to their participation in CBR, they are unable to work for a salary. The importance of this issue becomes magnified when participants are well below the poverty level.

At least one of the disadvantages mentioned here also affects family trainers. By assisting family members who have disabilities through CBR programmes, family trainers are hindered from earning a living. Poverty in the majority world poses an existential problem for them. The amount of time demanded from family trainers for assisting their disabled relatives can be quite high, depending upon the degree of assistance required for the person with disabilities. Beyond the issue of time, the family will also have to obtain money for medication and for transport to consult specialists or healers who do not live within the community (11). The widely stated reduction of rehabilitation costs with the 'creation' of CBR merely transfers the costs to the family (10). CBR is much more expensive than generally assumed when one considers the time and money required by the family (12).

The disadvantages resulting from utilising the unpaid work force may also effect people with disabilities themselves. If, for example, community workers are unmotivated because they do not receive a salary, the quality of their work will eventually reduce. Family trainers, who assist their family members with disabilities conscientiously, will possibly reduce the time they devote to their relatives if they can not guarantee basic support of all family members. Their priorities thus change from assisting their relatives to having to earn a living for their families.

It is possible that financial situation of people in the majority world, including the family trainers and community workers, will become worse in the future. The World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) call for many countries of the majority world to implement structural adjustment programmes. This causes countries to open their markets, abandon specific controls and reduce public expenditure (3). The neo-liberal politics of development could lead to increased social conflict and to a further marginalisation of the poor (11, 13).

How will the WHO deal with this problem? The unpaid work force in CBR is barely mentioned in the plans of WHO or UN. Helander only hints at difficulties of implementation of CBR: 'The availability of volunteers is influenced by many factors. Economic factors include the

amount of time free from work and household duties, and competing possibilities for remunerated occupations' (1). Although he recognises the correlation between unpaid work and the financial situation of the unpaid CBR work force, he makes some sweeping generalisations in some of his remarks. He speaks, for example, of 'giving up early' in reference to the dropout of unpaid CBR workers from programmes (1). In another passage, he makes the following generalisation: 'In some parts of Asia, it is easy to recruit non-salaried volunteers for community work – I have come across good examples in India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Phillipines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. In Africa, the tendency is to seek financial or other compensation' (1). Deepak and Sharma (3) report many contrary experiences about unpaid work force from different continents. They give examples of CBR programmes that used unpaid labour successfully, although this seems to be more of an exception (10).

This article does not question the entire concept of CBR. However, the author holds that WHO or UN have failed to consider a major aspect related to unpaid workers in CBR in their conceptualisation of CBR. Due to additional commitment of time to CBR and resulting financial consequences for the CBR workers, unpaid CBR work can lead to many problems for people with disabilities and their families. Hence one has to rethink on the issue of unpaid labour force in CBR. Such rethinking should have the active participation of people from the majority world. The deficiencies of CBR that stem from a eurocentric perspective – which possibly influenced the concept of unpaid workers in CBR- can only be overcome this way.

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