

## **Volunteers and Community-based Rehabilitation**

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## **Abstract**

Role of community volunteers is perceived as one of the major issues for the community-based rehabilitation (CBR) projects in the world. However, the term “volunteer” seems to denote a wide spectrum of identities and roles in the CBR projects. The paper presents a summary of results from a small survey to explore the meaning and interpretation of the term volunteer in CBR projects. The survey involved a brief questionnaire sent to managers of CBR projects in eight countries. The authors also consider some of the implications of the debate about the role of volunteers in CBR.

**Background:** In an international workshop on Community-based rehabilitation (CBR) held in Bologna (Italy) in 1998<sup>1</sup>, participants from twenty-two (22) CBR projects in different parts of the world were asked to identify the major issues facing them. Problems linked to the community volunteers were identified as one of the significant issues facing them by almost all of the participants. These problems seemed to be quite similar between the projects, even though they were presented in different ways and with differing emphasis, and included the following:

- ✓ Difficulty in finding new community volunteers.
- ✓ Fast turnover of volunteers.
- ✓ Need for additional resources for continuously training new volunteers.
- ✓ Lack of motivation among community volunteers.
- ✓ Need for paying incentives or small salaries to volunteers.

At the same time, from the discussions it was evident that different projects had very different expectations from their community volunteers, in terms of their roles and responsibilities.

The present paper looks at the references in the literature to the possible role of community volunteers in CBR and presents the finding of a small survey carried out in eight (8) different CBR projects on this subject. The paper also considers some of the underlying implications of this discussion on the CBR approach.

**A volunteer:** The word volunteer is derived from the Latin word '*voluntarius*.' The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'volunteer' as a person *who voluntarily undertakes or expresses a willingness to undertake a service while having no legal concern or interest*. The Open Resources Web directory defines the same term as *unpaid worker*. Thus the term has a double connotation, that of 'own free will' and that of 'without interest or payment'.

**Community-based Rehabilitation and volunteers:** The joint position paper<sup>2</sup> by the three agencies of the United Nations, International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and World Health Organisation (WHO) gives the following definition of CBR:

*Community-based rehabilitation is a strategy within community development for the rehabilitation, equalisation of opportunities and social integration of all people with disabilities. CBR is implemented through the combined efforts of disabled people themselves, their families and communities, and the appropriate health, education, vocational and social services.*

This definition focuses on the essential placement of CBR process *inside* the community with support from specific services from outside the community. In the light of practical experience of implementing CBR, there has been an evolution in the basic concepts underlying the CBR approach. For example, reflections about 'inclusive education', have led the thinking on to concepts of 'inclusive primary health care' and 'inclusive community'. However, probably there hasn't been sufficient reflection about the means used for the delivery of CBR. The WHO manual on CBR<sup>3</sup> uses the word

'Local Supervisor' to denote the person at the community level, who is responsible for transfer of knowledge and skills to disabled persons, their families and community members and recommends that:

*A local supervisor should be a local person chosen by the community; he or she should have the confidence of people and thorough knowledge of their way of life. In some programmes, local supervisor receives salary or some compensation; in others he/she is a volunteer.*

In the past twenty years and especially over the last decade, WHO manual or its adaptations, have strongly influenced the development of CBR projects all over the world. There is another book, which has also been important for the development of CBR projects, Disabled Village Children<sup>4</sup>. This book also talks about community workers or rehabilitation workers in 'community-directed' rehabilitation activities but it does not take a clear position about salaried workers versus volunteers, and seems to leave the decision to the projects and the local conditions.

**The crucial issue – the resources for CBR:** Disability and rehabilitation are rarely a priority for the Governments in less developed countries; often they may not be perceived as a priority also by the communities. Thus while many countries like Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mauritania etc. have adopted CBR as the national strategy for rehabilitation for more than ten years, there are no existing national programmes\* of CBR in these countries. The resources for starting CBR programmes are mainly coming from external sources. For example, in countries like Gabon, Congo Brazzaville and Mauritania, national programmes of CBR were started with support of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) but these programmes disappeared, when the support from the INGOs stopped.

Thus INGOs can have strong influence on the way CBR projects can develop.

The fundamental philosophy of CBR approach has been influenced by the experiences of rural community development promoted by grass-root organisations and community groups in many developing countries. These experiences have helped in evolving concepts like community ownership, participatory development, people-directed development linked with issues of sustainability, appropriate technology, self-reliance, etc. These same concepts are increasingly being used as a filter for measuring the validity of a CBR programme proposal by INGOs.

On the other hand, most of decisions of INGOs for supporting projects are still linked to "intervention approach". This means support is decided on the basis of written proposals prepared according to a standard format, providing information about clear and measurable objectives, monitoring, reporting, standard indicators, detailed action plans and budgets. Such standard formats may not be easy to reconcile with realities of participatory development. INGOs recognise these difficulties and look for easily measurable standard

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\* In this document, the term 'programme' has been used to indicate CBR activities involving governments and covering national territories or big areas, while the term 'project' is used to indicate CBR activities covering limited areas, managed by NGOs or governments.

ways to help in their decision making. The presence and numbers of community volunteers, seems to be an “easily measurable criteria” for judging the community participation and development.

**Learning about volunteers in CBR Projects:** For enhancing our knowledge about use of volunteers in the CBR projects, information was collected from CBR project managers from eight different countries. Three of these projects are managed by governmental structures while five are managed by Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs). These eight projects are: (1) RCPD located in Peshawar, Pakistan; (2) SETI located in Alexandria, Egypt; (3) National programme of CBR in Eritrea; (4) VINAREHA based in Hanoi, Vietnam; (5) South Sulawesi Provincial CBR programme in Indonesia; (6) National CBR programme in Mongolia; (7) Fr Antoine centre – Aitape CBR programme in Papua New Guinea; and (8) Saurabha-Samudaya CBR, SRMAB located in Bangalore, India.

A brief questionnaire was mailed to the eight programme managers that asked questions about compensation to local personnel, coverage of expenses, strategies for reducing volunteer dropout and selection of volunteers. This information was collected over a period of three months. The following issues emerged from an analysis of the completed questionnaires:

- *Do volunteers receive regular salary and who pays it?* Two programmes pay a monthly amount to all the CBR volunteers – one of these is a small programme managed by an NGO while the second is a larger programme managed by the Government. The costs of these payments are covered from the CBR programme budget.

Another programme pays a regular monthly amount only to volunteers with many years of experience and the cost is covered by funds collected from the community.

Remaining five programmes, don't pay any regular monthly amounts to the CBR volunteers.

- *Do volunteers get some other facilities like transport expenses while volunteering?* Six programmes provided monthly allowances to the CBR volunteers for covering travel expenses and general expenses, during home visits. This strategy is used more by NGO managed CBR projects.

One programme didn't provide any allowances for home visits but CBR volunteers received an allowance only during a training course.

One programme didn't provide any allowances to the CBR volunteers.

- *Strategies for reducing volunteer dropout through access to CBR programme resources:* Three programmes allowed the CBR volunteers a limited access to the programme resources. For example, a certain percentage of volunteers can join a Savings & Credit group, along with disabled persons and their families. These strategies are used by more by NGO managed CBR projects.

- *Strategy for reducing volunteer drop-out through recognition in CBR programme:* Four programmes have a system of recognising volunteers with long experience by giving them specific titles like “volunteer-in-charge”. These strategies are used more by NGO managed CBR projects.
- *Strategy for reducing volunteer drop-out through other benefits:* Five programmes have reported use of different strategies for keeping and motivating their volunteers, which include annual awards for the best volunteer, giving certificates of merit, providing T-shirts with programme logo, providing small gifts like pens, programme bags, etc. These strategies are used by both NGO managed and government managed CBR projects.
- *Selection of volunteers:* In six programmes, the volunteers took the decision to join the CBR programme. In two programmes, both managed by governments, the persons were *asked* by the community leaders to become CBR volunteers, though in both the cases, the persons had the possibility of refusing.

*Conclusions from the survey:* It is clear from the above analysis that the term “volunteer” could mean quite different things in different CBR programmes, including persons who may be receiving a salary.

**Institutions, Government personnel and community volunteers:** The CBR strategy described in international documents like the ILO, UNESCO and WHO joint position paper<sup>2</sup>, refers to an ideal situation, where the institutions at different levels (central, intermediate, peripheral) sustain and support the community level CBR worker, who may be paid worker (like a community health agent, trained also for CBR) or an unpaid community volunteer.

For example, if we look at the health-related institutions, it would mean that community level CBR workers are sustained by peripheral health services (Primary Health Care), intermediate level services (sub-district or district hospital) and central health services (specialised hospitals).

However, such ideal support services are not available to the vast majority of CBR workers. Some times when some support rehabilitation services are available, their collaboration with CBR programme may not always be satisfactory, even when the CBR programme is being managed under the same ministry of health. If the CBR programme is managed under some other ministry or it is managed by a local NGO, such institutional support may be even more difficult. Thus the community level CBR workers can often lack the support from the specialised and referral level institutions.

On the other hand, the pressures of preparing reports and collecting monitoring information, either from the authorities or from the international organisations, may be too demanding for community CBR workers. Such demands for preparing reports, participating in meetings and training courses, etc. may be made to both paid CBR workers and the unpaid community volunteers, without distinctions. There may not be clear description of roles of the paid CBR workers and community volunteers, creating an impression that both are expected to have similar roles.

However by definition, volunteers are supposed to offer themselves out of their own free will for doing some thing. Thus, there may be persons who may have plenty of time to dedicate to their chosen task or may have some time in specific periods of the month or year or may be available only for a limited period of time. Thus expectations about the contribution of free work by the volunteers as being equal to paid CBR workers may not be realistic.

**Sustainable CBR programmes:** Sustainability of the programmes is usually measured in terms of continuity of the programme activities after the external input of resources is stopped. So for a CBR programme, the sustainability can be measured in terms of continuation of activities, recruitment of new volunteers, new disabled persons receiving support, etc. Looked at in this way, many CBR programmes may not be sustainable, especially if the Government or some other organisation does not cover the cost of the central core team of CBR, which is responsible for identifying and training CBR workers, supervising their work, etc.

However, sustainability can also be looked at in terms of continuity of the change process brought about through the CBR programme in the lives of individual disabled persons and their families and communities. This may be seen from the continuation of the relationship between CBR workers and the disabled person, after a formal termination of CBR programme. It can also be seen through the changes in the attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviours of disabled persons and their family members, even after the termination of CBR programme. It may also be seen through some permanent changes brought about in the community like those related to acceptance of disabled children in regular local schools, interventions in the physical accessibility of school buildings, continuity of co-operatives and self-help groups started under the CBR programme.

For many international organisations sustaining CBR programmes in developing countries, the sustainability issue is evaluated mainly in terms of community participation and ownership, for which the presence of unpaid community volunteers is taken as a criterion. For example, the joint WHO and IDC guidelines on monitoring of CBR programmes<sup>5</sup> recommends that for assessing the *community mobilisation* information should be collected about “Number of volunteers as committee members and on the programme”. So, CBR project proposals may promise the presence of “volunteers”, to increase their chances of finding support.

**Defining roles of volunteers in CBR programmes:** Is it unrealistic to expect the involvement of community volunteers in CBR programmes? Mike Miles<sup>6</sup> reflects on the romantic illusions linked to community-based programmes:

*In the early 1980s there were wonderful dreams. Communities out there in the villages and rural towns were going to open up their hearts and their purses, their schools and their public places, to embrace disabled people. It was going to be free...Ten years later, CBR is not so new, not so bubbly. It turns out that it is not free.*

Perhaps, it would be unrealistic to expect that national CBR programmes covering whole countries or states, would be able to keep community volunteers involved for long periods of time. Voluntarism is linked to a world of idealism and solidarity, and it may not find a fertile ground for growth in the bureaucracy, which normally accompanies a governmental programme. Still there are examples of successful involvement of unpaid community volunteers in government-run CBR programmes covering relatively big areas, as in Indonesia and Eritrea.

Perhaps, it would also be unrealistic to expect well-structured multi-sectoral CBR projects with activities related to education, health, occupation, community development, organisations of disabled persons, etc., running solely on the basis of community volunteers. However, as the survey results show, there are on-going CBR projects which do involve CBR volunteers. The following example from Philippines, in which Barney Mcglade and Rita Aquino relate their experience<sup>7</sup> illustrates some of the underlying issues:

*Initially we established a Portage style home-based programme and begin to train local church workers and volunteers as “home visitors”. Due to work commitments these people soon dropped out...The programme was in crisis, even before it had started. Rita then hit on a brain wave of enlisting the help of mothers of disabled children...With surprising ease, we soon had a core group of four volunteer mothers acting as home visitors...five years later, these same mothers are now running the programme.*

Helander<sup>8</sup>, one of the authors of WHO manual, proposes that differences in volunteer participation in different CBR programmes may be due to cultural or other differences:

*In some parts of Asia, it is easy to recruit nonsalaried volunteers for community work...In Africa, the tendency is to seek financial or other compensation. In some countries, governments see voluntary work based on community initiatives with suspicion – the spark that may ignite the subversion. In others like Chad and Ghana, to encourage voluntary development work is the governments declared policy.*

However, such generalisations need to be taken with extreme caution. There are many CBR projects in Asia, Africa, Americas and Europe, where volunteer involvement is poor and there are other examples in the same continents, where the volunteer involvement is key component of successful CBR projects. Except for a few countries like Eritrea, majority of volunteers involved in CBR projects and programmes are women. Often the volunteers are disabled persons themselves or are their family members.

**“Exploitation” of volunteers:** The volunteers may be young unemployed persons, who may decide to join a CBR project, hoping for a paid employment in the future. Some times, they may join a project for receiving a certificate about their training, which can increase their chances of finding a job outside the CBR project. For such volunteers, especially if they are forced to work without adequate support from Governmental structures and personnel, and are regularly asked to put long hours of work in difficult situations, it is inevitable that they see their unpaid work for CBR as an exploitation. They are being asked to take on full-time or part-time responsibilities, which are not compatible with the role of a

volunteer. Such feelings may be stronger, if there is other paid staff working in the same projects.

**Developing countries, foreign debt, structural adjustment programmes and volunteers:** The last decade has seen the rise of market economy and globalisation. Big loans to developing countries, given mainly by American and European banks during seventies and part of eighties, resulted in a severe debt crisis in the nineties. International financial institutions like World Bank and International Monetary Fund have pushed for structural reforms, asking countries to open their economies for imports, abolish certain controls and reduce public spending. This has meant that governments are not allowed to hire new staff or replace the retiring personnel. At the same time, funds allocations for “non-productive” services like health, social and education have been reduced. Recovery of the costs by asking people to pay for these public services has become a practice in many countries, provoking public protests. In such situations, community-based programmes may be seen by the governments as an easy way to reduce costs or abolish support services and community volunteers may be expected to carry out tasks, which should be done by regular government personnel. In 1997, Cotonou (Benin), the inter-country workshop on CBR<sup>9</sup> involving eight African countries reported that one of the obstacles to community mobilisation in CBR was the large number of community development programmes, in which communities are expected to contribute.

**Conclusions - Unexplored areas in relation to role of volunteers:** The above considerations indicate the necessity of conducting more research, in different cultures and contexts, about the different issues related to involvement of community-volunteers. Such information would be useful not only for CBR projects but also for the different programmes aiming for community development. The CBR projects need to clarify the roles and needs of community volunteers, vis-à-vis, that of paid personnel. It must be recognised that though the term “volunteer” is used often in CBR programmes and projects, in reality the term covers a spectrum of identities and roles.

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