

## Editorial

Globally, the economic downturn in most parts of the world is a matter of concern, and will continue to be so for some years. This has particular implications for the disability and development sector in developing countries, as fund allocations from some donor countries are being drastically reduced and may even stop in the coming years. Sustainability of programmes in disability and development in developing countries, including CBR, that have been largely dependent on external funding, assumes a special significance at this point in time. Case studies of how CBR programmes are sustaining themselves through successful self help groups and local resource mobilisation, have been published and presented at various forums, and it is important to examine the key lessons for programme implementers from the last decade's experiences from different countries.

It is a well accepted axiom that programmes must be relevant and appropriate to local needs, local culture and contexts in the interests of sustainability, and this is supposed to be one of the key principles of programme planning and management in the development sector. But it is surprising to note that even now, some programmes in the disability sector started with external funding in many developing countries do not fully follow this axiom. Needs assessments are usually carried out in great detail and with the wide range of needs identified, activities are started with all good intentions to address them, but with little thought given to the sustainability of the activities once the donor agency withdraws. In some countries, excellent rehabilitation centres with good infrastructure and equipment have been started by external donors and no doubt they served a great need to begin with. When the donors withdrew from the country, these centres were supposedly handed over to the governments with written agreements, but the governments did not have the financial resources to maintain them. So while the centres are 'sustainable' on paper, in reality they are a glaring example of unsustainable activities started with good intentions to address identified needs, but without sufficient foresight to consider whether they were truly feasible and sustainable in the local context.

In some countries with centralised forms of governance, 'self-help groups' were started with the help of external agencies without due attention to modifying the concept of a self-help advocacy group fit into the local context. While such experiences have been described as successful case studies, in reality the groups

did not sustain once the external facilitators withdrew. In some other countries, projects that were started more than 50-60 years ago for a particular impairment group and based on charity models, still find it difficult to move towards a development approach, as seen by the system of grants and benefits that they continue to follow with their client groups. Due to donor compulsions, many of these projects continue to focus on specific impairment groups despite the fact that the incidence and prevalence of those impairments are reducing and there are other groups that may be in need of greater attention.

When funds were plentiful about a decade ago, some agencies went in for rapid geographical expansion of projects in some countries, which certainly increased coverage of activities and helped reach a larger number of persons in need of services and benefits. In the past few years when funds started getting reduced, many of the projects were closed, putting the client groups into difficulty, and leaving the local staff with the challenge of facing difficult questions. Sometimes, this kind of opportunistic planning and expansion of projects can do more harm than good: it leads to poor credibility for the donor and lack of sustainable services for the client groups after raising their expectations.

Local fund-raising within developing countries to facilitate sustainability has been tried by implementers in the disability and development sector for many years now. Although successful case studies for large scale local resource mobilisation are few, they do give some pointers for the way forward. Broad basing the sources of funding; involvement of the corporate sector in development; capitalising on the potential of the growing middle classes in many emerging economies to 'give'; use of retired volunteers; and formation of local NGO consortia to do joint fund-raising, are some examples. However, many such attempts have had only limited success, especially in view of the current economic crisis in many countries.

A key principle for sustainability is to have the local government take over and sustain the programmes that are initiated with external support. It is important for external donor agencies to fit their own plans and ideas into the local governments' plans and budgets. In some countries, there are some good examples of more realistic planning in this context, such as partnerships with local governments to initiate innovative models of service delivery, with external agencies providing mainly technical and capacity building support. This way, the activities are more relevant and feasible, and the responsibility of implementing and sustaining them lies with the governments.

The gloomy global economic outlook does indeed present a major challenge for the disability and development sector, but it can also be an opportunity in terms of more realistic planning and a renewed focus on self reliance for all stakeholders involved, especially persons with disabilities and their families on the one hand and local governments and service providers on the other, in the interests of sustainability.

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