

What is Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR)? A Guide for Understanding Inclusion

Introduction: Why CBR Matters

An estimated 15% of the world's population lives with a disability, and the vast majority of these individuals reside in developing countries, who are often among the world's most vulnerable and marginalized people, facing poverty and exclusion. Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) is a global strategy developed to ensure they are not left behind. It is a powerful idea focused on building communities where every person, regardless of ability, has the chance to participate fully, access essential services, and live a life of dignity, with their human rights fully realized.

To truly grasp what CBR is, we must first understand how our thinking about disability itself has evolved over time.

1. The Big Idea: Shifting How We See Disability

Community-Based Rehabilitation is built on a fundamental shift in understanding what "disability" means. This change in perspective moves the focus from the individual's impairment to the role society plays in creating barriers.

1.1. The Old Way: The "Medical Model"

Historically, disability was viewed through a "medical model." This approach sees disability as an individual's medical problem, defect or illness that needs to be treated, cured, or cared for by experts. In this view, the problem is located *inside* the person, and the primary solutions are medical treatment and specialized care, often separate from the community.

1.2. A New Perspective: The "Social and Human Rights Models"

Beginning in the 1960s, the disability rights movement challenged the medical model and introduced a new perspective: the "social model." Its central insight is that disability is not caused by a person's impairment but by societal barriers. These barriers can be physical (like buildings without ramps), attitudinal (like prejudice and stereotypes), or systemic (like exclusionary policies in education and employment). In this view, the problem is located *in society*, and the solution is to remove these barriers to create a more inclusive world.

This thinking has evolved into a human rights approach, which is now the global standard, cemented by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This approach recognizes that all people have fundamental rights, and it is society's

responsibility to ensure people with disabilities can enjoy those rights on an equal basis with others. The famous motto of the disability rights movement captures this spirit perfectly:

"Nothing About Us Without Us"

This table highlights the core differences between these two ways of thinking:

The Medical Model (Focus on the Individual)	The Social & Human Rights Model (Focus on Society)
Sees the person with a disability as the problem.	Sees societal barriers and discrimination as the problem.
Focuses on treatment, cure, and professional care.	Focuses on removing barriers and promoting social change.
Defines disability by a person's impairment or medical condition.	Defines disability as the result of interaction between impairments and societal barriers.
Aims to make the person "fit" into society.	Aims to make society inclusive and accessible for everyone.
Views people with disabilities as passive recipients of services.	Empowers people with disabilities as active participants in decision-making and advocacy.

This new way of thinking is crucial because it helps us understand and address one of the most significant challenges connected to disability: the vicious cycle of poverty.

2. Breaking the Cycle: The Link Between Disability and Poverty

There is a powerful, two-way link between poverty and disability; each is both a cause and a consequence of the other. An estimated 80% of persons with disabilities live in developing countries, and they make up 15-20% of the world's poorest people.

This cycle works in two keyways:

1. **Poverty Increases Disability:** People living in poverty are more likely to acquire an impairment. This is due to factors like poor nutrition, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, unsafe living or working conditions, and limited access to basic healthcare and prevention services.
2. **Disability Increases Poverty:** People with disabilities and their families are more likely to fall into, or remain trapped in, poverty. This happens because they face significant barriers to education, employment, and healthcare. Discrimination and exclusion,

combined with the extra costs associated with medical treatment and assistive devices, deepen their economic vulnerability.

Community-Based Rehabilitation is the practical strategy designed to break this cycle by putting the social and human rights models of disability into action at the community level.

3. The Blueprint for Action: The CBR Matrix

The CBR Matrix is the central framework that guides CBR programs around the world. It is a tool that helps ensure that actions are taken across all the key areas that make up a person's life, promoting holistic and inclusive development.

The matrix is built on five core components. The first four relate to key development sectors, while the fifth, **Empowerment**, serves as the essential foundation that supports and enables access to the others.

Health	Education	Livelihood	Social	Empowerment
Health Promotion	Early Childhood	Skills Development	Personal Assistance	Advocacy and Communication
Prevention	Primary	Self-Employment	Relationships, Marriage and Family	Community Mobilization
Medical Care	Secondary & Higher	Wage Employment	Culture and Arts	Political Participation
Rehabilitation	Non-Formal	Financial Services	Recreation, Leisure and Sports	Self-Help Groups
Assistive Devices	Lifelong Learning	Social Protection	Justice	Disabled People's Organizations

3.1. Explaining the Five Components

- **Health:** The goal of this component is to ensure that people with disabilities have access to the full range of health services available to everyone else. This includes health promotion, disease prevention, medical care for acute or chronic conditions, and specific rehabilitation services like physical therapy and access to assistive devices.
- **Education:** This component focuses on ensuring people with disabilities can access learning opportunities at all stages of life. This starts with early childhood care and development and continues through primary, secondary, and higher education, as well as non-formal and lifelong learning opportunities.

- **Livelihood:** The focus here is on economic empowerment. CBR works to ensure people with disabilities can earn a living and achieve financial independence. This includes skills development, support for self-employment or finding paid work, access to financial services like credit, and inclusion in social protection programs.
- **Social:** This component is about ensuring people with disabilities can participate fully in the social and cultural life of their communities. This includes fostering personal relationships, having a family, participating in cultural events, arts, sports, and recreation, and having access to the justice system.
- **Empowerment:** More than just a component, Empowerment is the foundational engine of the entire CBR strategy. It is the process of enabling people with disabilities to move from being passive recipients of services to becoming active drivers of change in their own lives and communities. It involves supporting them to advocate for their rights, mobilize community support, participate in political life, and form self-help groups and organizations to amplify their collective voice.

This matrix provides the comprehensive structure that makes Community-Based Rehabilitation a powerful tool for turning the principles of inclusion into real-world change.

4. Conclusion: From Ideas to Impact

Community-Based Rehabilitation is far more than just a set of services; it is a comprehensive strategy for inclusive development that starts at the grassroots level. It is rooted in a modern, rights-based understanding of disability that sees societal barriers—not individual impairments—as the main problem to be solved. By using tools like the CBR Matrix, it provides a practical roadmap for breaking the cycle of poverty and disability.

Ultimately, CBR works to change society, not just individuals. Its goal is to remove barriers and build a "society for all," where people with disabilities are recognized as equal members with full human rights, empowered to contribute to and benefit from the development of their communities.