

## Editorial

### About generals and too few soldiers...

The past period was for me a time of traveling – real-life and virtual – to different parts of the world. In part, this was needed because I was asked to give presentations at various fora.

I always have been very critical about attending conferences. The last decade especially, I increasingly became critical of the – often – very high costs of organising and attending conferences. That opinion has not changed much in spite of all the advantages and reasons usually given by people who frequently attend conferences. While there is certainly justification for organising such fora, I still have an uncomfortable feeling that the benefits not always outweigh the costs. What is truly new that is being presented in the field of disability and development? Of course, I am aware of all the counter arguments this claim; these vary from the importance of being updated about new developments and best practices, to ‘merely’ the value of networking – and meeting colleagues and old friends – albeit being of importance and for many, likely the most important reason to attend conferences. However, many of the conferences that I visited during my almost 40 years of work in the disability and development field were financed with public funds meant to improve the lives of people with disabilities and their families. Are the high costs of especially global and continental conferences truly justified, and does this benefit those whom we should serve? I don’t have answers, but I remain critical. And I realise when looking at the number of times that I attended or presented papers at conferences that I should of course not criticise anyone else.

I imagine that you as reader wonder what the above critical text about conferences has to do with the title of this editorial. Let me explain this. My most recent assignment took place in Gondar, a well-known historical town in the northwest of Ethiopia in an area close to Tigray. For many of you, the bells may start ringing. Tigray has been an area of intense conflict and human right abuses for the past 2 years or so. An internal war that hardly reaches the attention of mainstream media anymore because there are other wars and conflicts that seem to be more of an interest to report on. For instance, the war in Ukraine, which has a geopolitical impact that is at times hard to realise. However, we know that in wars, it is generally not the generals who die or get wounded on the battlefield, but it is the

soldiers sent to the battlefield, sometimes even unprepared, poorly trained and not well equipped.

Now, I am not writing about (internal) wars or conflict and its resulting immense human suffering, also in terms of those who become disabled: civilians as well as combatants on both sides of conflict.

I was recently invited by the Committee on Victim Assistance of the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction* to speak about the importance of CBR for persons who suffer from physical or psychological injury, economic loss, social marginalisation or substantial impairment of the realisation of their rights caused by the use of cluster munitions. At this Victim Assistance Experts Meeting, the testimonies were touching and encouraging. At the same time the tragedy continues. Mankind (and thus countries) still – after adopting a 25- year-old Convention, produce and use Anti-personnel Mines and the suffering and casualties caused by anti-personnel mines, is astonishing.

Coming back to the general and soldiers, I am of the opinion that there are other ‘wars’ happening too. One of my African colleagues – a co-trainer during the one-week training at the University of Gondar on handling cerebral palsy within CBR – triggered me to think this. When reviewing the status of CBR and doing some fieldwork in Gondar town, he stressed that in CBR in general – so not at Gondar specifically – we have too many generals and too few soldiers. What he meant is that in most cases, CBR field staff is poorly trained; work under miserable conditions; are the least paid; are the least recognised and valued, and hardly have the instruments and means to be successful while they are expected to be at the core of CBR programmes. I would even argue that field staff are and will be for the coming decades the most vital part of rehabilitation systems! There are however, in general, too few of such vitally important people and usually they are even not formally part of the system but get a meagre stipend. These people are the soldiers, but they have not the equipment to win the battle. They often become demoralised as the needs that they observe are too big to handle.

At the same time, the generals (therapists, managers, policymakers) sit in their nice offices and hardly visit the (battle)field, the community. They are involved in STARS<sup>1</sup> exercises in order to get themselves more stars and more colleagues of

---

1 A Tool for the Systematic Assessment of Rehabilitation Situation

which many have absconded the battlefield to move to greener pastures where (financial and academic) reward is many times higher than in their own country. At best, they write their reports, publications, and often develop new strategies without hardly practical experience in fieldwork themselves or even knowing, from evidence, whether that old strategy ever had an effect in the first place.

It appears at times that the CBR battle has been lost. In fact, it is the community and within the communities that many adults and children with disabilities, as well as their parents and families, are on the losing end. What is your view on this? Should we continue writing our reports, publications and develop new strategies? Should I continue to produce an editorial that won't be taken too seriously?

This is the story CBR, a story of the generals and the soldiers. I hope that you ask yourself whether you are a general or a soldier and, if you are a general, that you ask yourself in how far you are supporting the soldiers! The reality is that we keep marching on with ever decreasing numbers of soldiers!

Your editor-in-chief.

Huib Cornielje

[h.cornielje@enablement.nl](mailto:h.cornielje@enablement.nl)