Reviewer's report

Title: Synthesis of community-based rehabilitation project evaluation reports: (1) overview and main findings of a proof-of-concept study

Version: 1 Date: 24 August 2007

Reviewer: Harry Finkenflugel

Reviewer's report:

General

The "synthesis of CBR project evaluation reports" is presented in two separate, but connected, articles. With the editor I wonder if these articles should be merged and presented as one article. After studying both articles my conclusion is that this is very well possible but the number of issues covered (and the increased length of the article) would make it more difficult for the readers to understand the research (especially if we take into consideration that for many of the people interested in CBR English is not their mother tongue). Although the introductory parts of the second article overlap with the first article I feel it is worth discussing both the major and the minor themes to the extent the authors have done in the second article. Also, the second article can now be read and understood without studying the first article.

Whereas I can appreciate this type of research and do think there is a need to access reports and other grey literature in a systematic way I have two main and a few additional concerns:

(1) In the Background section the authors stated "We reasoned that the most meaningful ..." Whereas this limitation is understandable when it comes to the workload and testing the methodology it seriously hampers the use and interpretation of the nodes and categories. The authors themselves have pointed out that looking only at the recommendations sections of the project reports ignores issues that have - in the view of the evaluators - been well addressed or have been ignored in the CBR projects. As such the "evidence-based policy" will be a policy on shortcomings and does not include how to sustain the already successful components of the projects.

(2) An alternative and relative simple approach would have been to design a check list of relevant issues and to screen every evaluation report using this check list. It is not clear from the texts why the authors did not take this path and decided to use an approach that - in my understanding - is primarily designed to study a phenomenon that is poorly researched, innovative, or lacks theory.

However, I do see potential of this study to assist in constructing such a check list (covering - in the words of the authors - the robust, discernable and meaningful themes) but this is not mentioned as an aim of this study. In fact, the authors suggest using this synthesis methodology for future research in CBR and that makes me wonder what type of outcomes the authors would expect from
re-applying this methodology on other reports or other sections of reports.

To add on the above concerns I would share a few other concerns with the authors and editor

(3) With this methodology no insight is provided in the number of recommendations per report and the relative weight of the different recommendations. I imagine that evaluators will distinguish between recommendations that are of crucial importance to the project and those that would polish up the project.

(4) CBR projects can be very different in size, location, circumstances, resources, objectives, developmental stages etc. With the convincing emphasis on the different management issues one wonders if the type of recommendations from the different projects are indeed comparable. If the general conclusion is that CBR projects need to strengthen their management what type of changes or interventions in the management are we actually looking at? In other words how can policy makers and program implementers use the results of this exercise?

(5) The authors have recognized the fact that evaluators do not share a common evaluation instrument or methodology. Issues like ‘gender’ and ‘advocacy’ are rare in the recommendations and this could be because these have been adequately addressed in the project or because these were not part of the evaluation (see also concern no 1). This might be enforced by the observation that evaluators are often sent by the funding agency and they might emphasize issues that are relevant for them (like management issues, funding, collaboration). In this perspective the comment in the Discussion section starting with "This is a striking finding ..." should be rephrased in terms of shortcomings of the research more than in terms of a "cause for further debate and research". The issue of non-or under-representation of certain issues has been (partly) addressed in the second article but need more emphasis in this first article.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

The authors have addressed the limitations of the study in the Discussion section and share and addressed to some extent my concerns. However, I would like to challenge the authors to consider my comments and possibly incorporate these
in the text.

**What next?:** Accept after minor essential revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.
However, to be inclusive I should point out that I am one of the external examiners of the Centre for International Health and Development (where the second author is based and which accommodated the first author at the time of the research) and do work with the third author on a different project. Also, with my colleagues Johan Velema and Huib Cornielje we do work on the same issue but have chosen a different strategy. Our articles are due to be published in Disability and Rehabilitation but do not overlap the work by Kuipers, Wirz and Hartley. Lastly, I have seen earlier drafts of these articles but did not correspond with the authors about these drafts.