

ExOCOP

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Keynote speech

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Introduction

First I would like to take the opportunity to thank the organizers for inviting me to this conference, which celebrates this impressive European project.

As we have just heard, the ExOCOP is an ambitious project covering all aspects of prisoner's and ex-offender's lives and focusing on all thinkable efforts to reintegrate ex-offenders into mainstream society. Throughout the project, the aim has been – and continues to be – to develop a common strategy for the preparation of inmates for their social reintegration.

Today's conference may mark the end of three years of intensive efforts, carried out first and foremost to gather experience from the field of social inclusion of inmates across Europe. But it also appears clearly from the conference agenda that we still have the most important tasks ahead of us.

This is a complex challenge requiring efforts at many levels and in different contexts. Not least in connection with the daily routines in prisons and correctional institutions. Therefore it is essential not to underestimate the significance of the everyday environment – that is, the prison regime and the staff – to inmates' development potential. I shall come back to that.

Moreover, we need political intention and will to develop the framework of these initiatives. The broadly dispersed network of ExOCOP partners reflects the intention and the will to set a course for a visionary and ambitious development in this field. This is further supported by the large number of relevant participants who have accepted the invitation for this conference. In my view, the combination of knowledge, experience and political scope of action is exactly what gives us the best platform for the future work.

The comprehensive work already performed by the ExOCOP network to capture lessons learned across borders provides us with a good starting point for the further development as we can base it on the very best experience gained by each individual network member. In plain words you can say that "it is not enough to have knowledge, one must also apply it", or as Johann Wolfgang Goethe, put it: "Es ist nicht genug zu wissen, man muss auch anwenden; es ist nicht genug zu wollen, man muss auch tun" (Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre).

If we are to succeed, we need a holistic approach.

This is also the reason why this conference and the Berlin Declaration signals the beginning of a new, forward-looking joint effort to strengthen and enhance the continued implementation of initiatives in this field by embracing the spirit of co-operation.

Common challenges

The political arena in Europe keeps changing all the time. Society as such is facing pressing demands for rationalisation, unemployment rates are high, and the economy is unstable. All in all, Europe is under pressure, and the future seems uncertain to many people.

As you all know some of the consequences to prison services are overcrowding, in many ways a more challenging clientele and many foreign inmates, result in greater pressure on both inmates and staff.

In December 2011 the new European rules on the transfer of prisoners entered into force. Accordingly, without their consent convicted prisoners can be transferred to another EU Member State to serve their sentence. It may sound easy but it brings us considerable challenges. Because it is a fundamental principle that the possibilities for social reintegration must be better in their home country compared with the transferring country. This renders the need for greater knowledge on the prison systems in other countries more urgent and calls for much closer corporation and exchange of information in this field between EU countries.

The long-term impact of the economic crisis may also lead to diminishing political support and insufficient allocation of financial resources for social reintegration initiatives and a risk of one-sided focus on security.

Therefore it is essential for us as prison practitioners, whether we are prison officers or politicians, that we maintain the current positive momentum despite the challenges of the time because we know that it works.

Frameworking

That this is already the case is evident from the great activity in the policy field. Many of us met in Budapest in 2010 for the conference entitled '*Pathways to Inclusion – Strengthening European Cooperation in Prison Education and Training*' at this occasion we succeeded in creating a common platform for planning the contents of the enforcement programmes to leave the individual inmate better off at his or her release through targeted educational courses, job training programmes and strengthened contact to family and personal network.

The Council of Europe has also hosted a conference in Strasbourg gathering both director generals of prison administrations and director-generals of probation services under the heading of 'Working together to promote the social reintegration of prisoners'.

The aim remains the same whether we attend to our tasks inside or outside the prison walls.

We know that the transition from prison to freedom is the most vulnerable period for our clients. This is where it will show whether the activities in the prisons have had any value for the social reintegration, and whether a proper foundation has been laid for the probation service, which is to take over. And this is where it will show whether the probation service is able to continue and develop the foundation potentially laid by the prisons.

The transition period will show how much the systems, the prisons, the probation service and the mainstream society depend on each other's professionalism and willingness to co-operate.

The most recent example of the common European desire for increased co-operation and a holistic approach is the recent establishment of EuroPris.

One might say that EuroPris is a parallel to the CEP in the prison field, and close co-operation between EuroPris and the CEP has indeed been launched already. They are certainly not competing organisations, but organisations that supplement and complement each other in the same way that prisons and probation services do in the individual member countries.

All this is similarly expressed in the Berlin Declaration. Closer co-operation and improved communication between the relevant actors are exactly what is essential. And the reason for the aim of greater harmonisation and closer co-operation between the Member States and the European Commission originates not least in a common European desire to support the efforts of promoting social inclusion, and to create a common framework for such efforts.

Even though we are currently facing massive challenges, I find that even at a political level we have reached a common European understanding that it pays and is in the interest of society to focus on qualifying training programmes, vocational employment and treatment of inmates to reduce incarceration costs and recidivism.

In general, when you are under pressure you have to be innovative and have the courage to pursue new ways. Maybe this is the reason why the Chinese word for 'crisis' is made up of two components: the symbols for danger and opportunity. Just like the Chinese ideogram, everybody has the potential to choose whether to see a crisis or a challenge as a danger or a strong development potential.

Or as Sir Winston Churchill put it: "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity. An optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."

What we should do in my point of view is therefore to spend the time being optimistic and innovative. We are better equipped for this process if we collaborate and learn from each other's experiences.

Policies in the prison and resettlement context

Normalisation

As mentioned the importance of the regime, the staff and the environment are decisive for creating a setting for learning. I consider these elements to be crucial steps for finding a way to interlace conventional prison activities with innovative initiatives.

It is a basic principle of the European Prison Rules that “life in prison shall approximate as closely as possible the positive aspects of life in the community”.

This is what we call the ‘principle of normalisation’. If implemented, it is actually a revolutionary thought. Because it means that we must organise our prisons, and not least our prison regimes, as the outside community would do it. Only if special reasons make it necessary should the actual solution be based on correctional considerations. Of course, that will often be necessary for reasons of order and security. However, the ‘principle of normalisation’ is nevertheless the best safeguard against habitual thinking.

It has been said many times already, but in my opinion it cannot be said too often!

“I am not young enough to know everything,” Oscar Wilde once said, but being one of the oldest and longest-serving myself, this makes me even more convinced that the idea of normalisation is in fact the best outset for the development of a decent humane and efficient prison and probation service, which may contribute to making the transition from imprisonment to probation, or the transition from imprisonment to freedom, as efficient and effective as possible.

When we meet at international conferences to discuss the best possible way of reducing the risk of recidivism, the task is often conceived as just inventing new spectacular programmes for selected prisoners. Although that may in itself be an improvement and contribute to pushing the barriers of both the prison service and the individual, we also have to make sure that we have a robust and fertile basis for working with the majority of prisoners. If not, we might see the spectacular, innovative initiatives blooming, but without taking roots.

In other words: If we do not organise the everyday life in prisons in a way that will support and motivate the offenders themselves to make efforts to put crime behind them, then even all the occupational offers, treatment programmes and probation efforts in the world will be of no use. If we deprive the prisoners of all self-determination, if we place them in overcrowded, obsolete, run-down prisons, if we talk to them as second-rate people, how can we then believe that they will gain respect for us and faith in our intention to help them? If they consider us oppressors and enemies, how then can we believe that they will accept our offers of treatment, training and education and so on? And if we do not give prisoners influence on their own fates, including not least the contents of their personal sentence plans, how then can we demand of them to take ownership of their futures?

In my point of view the most essential focus area to keep in mind is the relationship between our clientele and staff, particularly uniformed prison officers. We need staff with the right values who take responsibility for pursuing reintegration efforts with the same zeal as security tasks. We know not only from studies, but also from daily

experience that certain barriers are still difficult to overcome for both staff and inmates, particularly the art of talking to each other. This barrier is destructive to everybody's everyday lives and to dynamic security; and the uncertainty caused by this distance has an impact on the staff's working environment and the necessary learning atmosphere for inmates. User driven innovation, meaning the involvement of the inmates and staff in the co-creation of good solutions to everyday problems, as well as The Positive Deviance Concept have proven extremely useful in this context, but that is another story.

In my point of view creativity and innovation are predominantly about developing and improving our core product – and become even better at it. This is where we constantly have to make demands of ourselves as organisations to become better at doing the work that is the reason for our existence.

We must prove our value by constantly raising the baseline. We have to ask ourselves all the time whether the framework and the prison life offered contribute to bringing offenders safely back to society. What we are doing may be enough, but is it also good enough?

By raising the baseline and increasing the standards of our educational, occupational and treatment offers, we may reduce the distance between baseline and spectacular programs.

And how do we apply our knowledge in real life?

Firstly, because we must believe that we can change people, that we can change fates and influence the future. This cannot be done by depriving inmates of their rights or humiliating them, but by treating them decently, like fellow human beings with exactly the same desires and needs as everybody else. Secondly, we have to be aware that our task also changes in line with changes in society, for better or worse.

However, the starting point must always be the individual inmate; in other words: by 'putting inmates at the centre'. Our success depends to a great extent on whether the individual inmate develops in a positive direction. We need to maintain constant focus on the development potential of each individual. To the addict, it may be an offer of and motivation for treatment that paves the way for his or her first step in a better direction. To inmates whose offences are closely linked to their gang affiliation, support for and motivation to leave the gang environment may be the most relevant course of action. Similarly, there are initiatives for all inmates involving a professional approach to the whole person which may contribute to making persons move from A to B. It is crucial that the aim of all activities should always have a future perspective.

Action plans

The best solution would be to draw up joint action plans for the full period and involve the inmates in the process. In Canada they have had good experience with simply lending new inmates a typewriter and asking them to write down during the first week their own thoughts about their lives, their plans for the future and what they want to achieve during their prison term. This approach has improved the quality of the action plans considerably and made the inmate assume responsibility themselves. Preferably

all action plans should include and oblige the general social services authorities which are to take over when the prison and probation services let go. After all, while prison and probation services, which have exactly the same goals for their activities, often succeed in setting up reasonably well-functioning co-operation relations, it is typically more difficult with local authorities and other civil authorities, labour market authorities and so on which do not see ex-offenders as a core area.

Experience from several countries shows that local authorities lack both knowledge of and interest in these special clients and the work carried out in prisons and by probation services. At the same time, our staff may find it difficult to manoeuvre in the municipal landscape.

One possibility of improving the co-operation may be to make clear written agreements between the probation service and the individual local authorities, specifying in the minute detail who is responsible for what, who are the relevant contacts persons and so on. It is heavy work, but experience indicates that it is worth the while.

Meaningful occupation targeted specifically at a post-release job

We have to make as sure as possible in connection with the enforcement of prison sentences that inmates' occupation has a post-release perspective. It is imperative that the individual inmate can see a reason for the activities and that they have the perspective of facilitating social reintegration. In other words, we have to reduce the distance between activities in prison and activities in mainstream society.

The main objectives of the European Social Fund are to even out differences in wealth and living standards in the Member States and regions of the European Union and to promote economic and social cohesion. A main task of the European Social Fund is to increase employment in the European Union and to prepare the European labour force and enterprises for future challenges.

The intention to improve occupational opportunities, support education, training and lifelong learning, and strengthen social reintegration is just in line with the objective of our activities.

From my perspective the keyword is *competencies!*

We have to make sure to recognise the skills and qualifications already acquired by inmates and to give them possibilities to maintain and develop their competencies – preferably by certified skills. We can improve the quality of the lives of inmates through better qualifications and occupational possibilities. Norway has been successful in gradually introducing the possibility that prison inmates can request an assessment of their prior knowledge. We have adopted a similar approach containing clarification of competencies and training guidance as regular elements of a prison stay. Because acknowledgement of competencies may be a stepping stone for further education or a regular job.

We can do a lot as prison services, but we need help from the outside world to really make a difference, reduce recidivism and lower the number of crime victims. Dedicated outsiders may bring us the expertise that we do not have already.

An example of this is a food cooking project in a closed Danish prison in the autumn of 2011. The underlying idea of the project was in line with the activities of Jamie Oliver. The project inventor and main instructor was similarly a famous Danish gourmet chef. The project was also used as the setting for the recording of a TV documentary about prison life. The project was planned to last eight weeks and end up with the grand opening of a prison restaurant at which the public could order a table and enjoy a full seven-course gourmet menu. Prisoners who were hardly able to fry an egg before were now proudly producing and serving the most delicious and delicately presented food of the same high quality as at the finest restaurants. The Minister of Education was present at that occasion. I was also invited so I can assure you that the prisoner's faces simply glowed with pride and happiness when they were applauded by a competent audience, as deserved. And how was this possible?

I believe that the reason for the success was that the inmates could see that the starry chef really intended to make a difference with the project because he was dedicated to making it a success and delivered a highly professional job himself and not least because he dared make demands on and have great expectations of the prisoner's. They gained confidence in him, and he gave them new opportunities.

The competencies that the inmates had acquired during those eight weeks were be applied as credits towards the chef training programme. The inmates could therefore continue the project, but now under the auspices of a regular training programme.

The project was successful mainly because the inmates were given an opportunity to show what they could do.

Kenny MacAskill, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice, once told how in the old days habitual offenders were deported to Australia. As many as 7,000 prisoners multi-recidivists - were deported by force. And what happened? Not one of them relapsed into crime. Exactly because they were given new opportunities; an opportunity to establish a new home, an opportunity to work and an opportunity to create a new life at a place at which no one had any negative expectations of them.

But opportunities do not make it all. My point is that such projects will only become successful if there is a solid baseline as a solid basis for learning. And when we as organisations and our staff are open, tolerant and receptive to ideas from the outside.

Relative to the more spectacular projects, it is crucial that they can subsequently become integrated into the system as regular training offers to inmates. We therefore have to be aware all the time of the inherent training and occupational opportunities in the extraordinary activities offered.

Despite – or maybe because of – the economic crisis, the Danish Parliament decided to focus increasingly on more training of inmates. Over the next four years, the Danish Prison and Probation Service will receive an appropriation of 16 million euro, corresponding to an 80 per cent increase in our current training budget. The funds are mainly to be spent on guiding inmates and clarifying their competencies and on increasing the number of qualifying training programmes. This huge appropriation for targeted training is a clear signal from our politicians. It *does* pay to invest in the social inclusion of ex-offenders!

However, we cannot focus unilaterally on training and education. If our efforts are to prove fruitful, it is necessary – as I mentioned before – to look at ways to reduce the distance between the life in prison and in mainstream society. We can achieve this by extending the activities of the Prison and Probation Service to include post-release efforts intended to make sure that ex-offenders get a good start after their prison stay. To this end, co-operation with local authorities and other stakeholders is essential, and the various authorities have to improve their co-operation about the individual ex-offender. On the other hand, it is also essential to invite society into our prisons. One possibility could be to introduce a resettlement guarantee as in Norway where civil authorities have a duty to provide housing and a job or training in connection with release. They do not have a specific procedural guarantee in Norway, but it is still a very clear political signal.

Moreover it would be obvious to make stronger ties to relevant authorities already during the incarceration period. Sweden, Norway, Great Britain and other countries have established a successful co-operation arrangement with job centres to plan in-prison vocational training programmes and follow up on the job situation of each ex-offender.

In general, we have to be aware of the consequences that a prison stay may have on inmates' possibility of keeping contact to the outside world and maintaining and strengthening the necessary qualifications to be able to manage in society after their release. My main concern is the increasing digitalisation of society, which renders it difficult to gain access to education, training, jobs and various public services if you do not have access to the Internet, or if you do not have the necessary skills in using information technology. For instance in my country all correspondence to and from public services will be digitalised from year 2015. This will create a crucial challenge for all prison systems for the next many years. Several countries are already working on solutions to this problem. To mention an example: In Britain, the development of the 'Virtual Campus' has shown the way. And I suspect that the Belgians' too are in the lead in this respect.

Mentors and visits

2012 is the European year of active aging and intergenerational solidarity. For various reasons I find that idea very encouraging. I find that we should also bear this in mind and maybe even involve experienced senior citizens even more in this work, for instance in mentor schemes. Continuous and reliable contact to another adult has proven to be incredibly important to ex-offenders. Senior citizens may also play an active role in connection with visiting services and support for training or education and thereby facilitate the social reintegration of ex-offenders. Again we are talking about dedicated persons who can contribute something new to our organisations and create relations of trust and confidence with inmates.

Conclusion

All in all, I feel confident that the high priority given to this field by the European Social Fund, combined with stronger co-operation between the relevant parties, a prison service that is opening up towards the world and now also the possibility of strong,

strategic co-operation at European level, has created a good starting point for raising the baseline and thereby creating the essential solid basis for the extraordinary add-ons.

There are lots of opportunities ahead of us. So ladies and gentlemen as Thomas Carlyle advised us: “Work and despair not!”

Let me finally make Sir Winston Churchill’s words mine: “For myself I am an optimist. It does not seem to be much use to be anything else”.