



Workshop on Foreign National Offenders

World Café Report

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Introduction

One of the greatest values of this kind of event is the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas. There can only be time for a few to make extended presentations but there is a great deal of experience in the room and the World Café provided a forum for tapping into this.

In reporting back on the world café I want to open by making the point that foreign national offenders and foreign national prisoners are not a homogenous group. One may be a person who has lived in the country where they have been arrested since childhood or for many years. All their family and friends are there and they may be facing deportation to a country which is in effect foreign to them and where they may not even be able to speak the language. Another person may be well established in the country where they have been arrested but have retained strong links to their country of origin. Some will be travelling and passing through with no wish to stay. Some will be migrants with no right of residence. It is self evident that the needs and circumstances of prisoners from these different groups are dissimilar.

Another preliminary observation. The voice of the individual prisoner has not been heard much at the conference, only perhaps in reports of those research studies which have interviewed prisoners.

Language and communication

There was a lot of discussion in the World Café about language and communication issues. It brought to mind the advice of a lawyer at an earlier conference that it was essential to first learn the language of the country in which you are about to commit a crime as otherwise you would face serious difficulties with both the court process and in serving any sentence. On a more serious note it was generally agreed that good quality interpretation is essential in any formal proceedings or in medical examinations.

From Austria and from Germany we learned about the development of the interpreter's role to that of *cultural mediator*, interpreting not just language but also cultural differences. In this way prisoners could be helped to have a better understanding of the culture of the country in which they were detained. This had been valuable, for example, where there had been cultural problems in working with female staff.

In some countries there were telephone interpretation services which were readily accessible in a wide range of languages and in situations where finding an on site interpreter was impractical.

Courses and education

There was a general view that language difficulties were a barrier to participating in training and offending behaviour courses but there was some challenge to this. Many prisoners had survived for years in the country where they were arrested and it was possible to communicate sufficiently well with them in spite of language deficiencies. The conference learned of the sufficiency of 'poor Swedish' for many purposes. We were also reminded that many native language speaking prisoners had poor language and communication skills but this could not be a reason for neglecting to work with them. Programmes could be designed with a range of communication skills in mind.

In practice courses and education were rarely designed with foreign national prisoners in mind except in prisons housing only foreign nationals. In these prisons training had

been focussed on skills which prisoners could use when they returned to their country of origin. This included, intriguingly, business skills, as running a small business was a realistic option for some. Considering the high percentage of foreign nationals in many prisons should not many more courses be designed which are accessible and relevant to them? Some commented that the prospect of deportation could be a disincentive to take part in courses and that paid work was often preferred.

Phone calls

For many foreign national prisoners phone calls were crucial for day to day survival, to maintain family and community links and to prepare for release. These needs were broadly recognised though this was often complicated by concerns about security. Experience in other countries was useful to put security concerns into context and could show that some security concerns were misplaced. There was an issue of time zones and fitting calls into prison routine. A foreign national only prison had responded to this with considerable flexibility and where calls could not be made voice mail had been useful. Skype was widely valued but by no means universally accepted.

Health

Discussion focussed particularly on mental health practice and problems perceived in working across cultural boundaries. But this is not a problem particular to prisons and is an important issue in community mental health practice in our increasingly diverse communities where there are practitioners with relevant knowledge and skills whose experience could inform prison health care. Mention was made of a higher incidence of self harm among foreign national prisoners. There was also concern about TB and routine screening was seen as valuable.

Health issues had been looked at chiefly in the context of prisons in Europe but there was also experience in the room of the severe health problems faced by European prisoners in poorer countries around the world where conditions were life threatening and health care was of a very poor standard. Prisoners Abroad in the UK made grants to British people in prison in poor countries to pay for basic health care. In spite of this there was an increase in the numbers of those dying in prison.

Deportation

Anxieties about deportation had a corrosive effect on the lives of many foreign national prisoners. Yet often little serious thought was given to what the deportee would face on return to their country of origin or indeed to the implications for the 'home' country of their return.

An example was given of a young French born man in a British prison facing return to a country which he had left as a young child and where he was unable to speak the language. Initial advice that he should go to 'the town hall' for help was useless. Eventually contact was made with a branch of the Salvation Army who were able to help him find temporary accommodation while he could sort out his resettlement.

The implications of the deportation of potentially dangerous offenders who represented a real risk to the countries to which they were returning were rarely considered. Nor were steps taken to alert the authorities in the country of return. Very few countries had established arrangements for the resettlement of returning deported prisoners. Where

these existed, as with Prisoners Abroad in the UK or the Bureau Buitenland in The Netherlands, care could be taken to attend to issues of risk.

Preparation for release

There was recognition of the importance of working with each foreign national prisoner as an individual and making contact with organisations which could help with their resettlement in the country to which they would return. It was not clear how often this actually happened. More could be expected of embassies. It was important to develop better contacts between prisons and community based organisations abroad. There would be value at European level of collecting and sharing information about organisations in countries of return which could assist with resettlement. Most would probably be NGOs. It was suggested that there should be a statutory duty in each country to follow up prisoners returning from abroad.

One group had looked at resettlement from the different perspectives of the returning prisoner and the resettlement worker and had used an element of role play to explore this. The message above all was that it was only possible to establish the client's expectations by *speaking to him personally*. This was an important point because, as was mentioned earlier, the voice, or rather the voices, of prisoners were not much in evidence in conferences of this kind. Maybe that could be put right on a future occasion and ex prisoners could be invited to attend.

