



European Union Activities to promote the Resettlement of (Ex)-offenders

The Current Situation

Prison Services throughout the European Union are stretched to the limit. There is an overall occupancy level, based on officially stated capacity, of 114%¹. In some Member States such as Greece and Cyprus, the corresponding figure is over 170%. In only nine of the 25 Member States is the figure less than 100%. The prison population has risen steadily over the last 10 or 11 years and throughout the EU, it is now 27.9% more than it was in 1995 which means that one out of every 800 European citizens is in prison. A major factor in producing and maintaining these record numbers of inmates are high reconviction rates. A recent UK study² of all adults released from prison in the first quarter of 2003 shows that 58.9% were reconvicted in the following two year period. Whereas, the Netherlands³ seems to have one of the lowest rates but it is still 37% over a post-release period of four years.

The EQUAL Community Initiative seeking New Solutions

Amongst all of the current EU Programmes and Initiatives, the 1281 Development Partnerships (DPs) launched under the two strands of the Employability pillar of EQUAL offer the widest and deepest pool of experience that can be used to strengthen the employability of disadvantaged groups and thus, help to prevent offending and re-offending. Some 121 of these Employability DPs have piloted new approaches to working with ex-offenders through re-settlement support, aftercare or assisting inmates whilst in prison. These projects deal *primarily or exclusively* with (ex)-offenders and directly involve the institutions/authorities of the penal system.

Many of the new measures tested by the EQUAL DPs have been successful in combating recidivism. For example, the treatment teams of the Swedish project "Better Release" decreased the rate from 70% to 40%. The "Mabis.Net" project in Germany provided systematic support and management in resettlement and reduced the recidivism of young offenders from 80% to 40%. This dropped to 30% when it was possible to find jobs that corresponded to the training, which they had received in the juvenile detention centres. The promoter of the "Telfi" DP, the Institute for Justice and Criminal Sociology in Vienna, has proved that participation in the EQUAL programme leads to a reduction in recidivism, which is directly related to the length of time spent in their occupational preparation measures.

In total, the 121 DPs that are exclusively concerned with (ex)-offenders have received financial support from the ESF in excess of 170m €. Thus, they represent a very substantial European investment in the development and testing of innovative good practices that have a potential for dissemination and mainstreaming throughout the European Union.

Mainstreaming the New Solutions

UKgb and Germany are leading a Steering Group⁴ of ten Member States which are twinned with another 12 countries. This group coordinates a series of activities to mainstream innovative resettlement practices that have been developed and tested within EQUAL. The first stage in this European Mainstreaming Programme was a major Exchange Event held in Lisbon during October 2006. The event brought together EQUAL DPs to agree on a set of topics to be presented at a subsequent Policy Forum, in Poland, during June 2007. The intention of this Forum is to confront those individuals who are responsible for elements of penal and/or

¹ Based on National Data, last updated on 10 December 2006, from the International Centre for Prison Studies at Kings College, University of London

² Home Office Statistical Bulletin - Re-offending of adults: results from the 2003 cohort – November 2005

³ Recidivism following treatment; a statistical overview of criminal recidivism of former offenders under an entrustment order in the Netherlands - ISBN: 90-5454-613-1 - 2005

⁴ **Belgium (fr)** with Belgium (nl); **The Netherlands**; **Germany** with France, Czech Republic and Greece; **Luxemburg**; **Italy** with Sweden and Austria; **Portugal**; **Poland** with Lithuania and Finland; **Spain**; **UKgb** with Estonia; **UKni** with Latvia, Hungary and Ireland

resettlement policies with the good practices that are emerging from EQUAL and to engage their interest in taking these forward. The three main themes for this Policy Forum are:

- **The ‘holistic approach’ to rehabilitation of offenders** - The partnership principle of EQUAL has resulted in many positive examples of structured cooperation between all those public and private bodies and NGOs that are involved in the process of resettlement. The fundamental message is that such approaches offer more effective and also less costly solutions than more traditional practices that are constrained by institutional boundaries and thus, often involve fragmentation of effort. Experience from EQUAL has shown how all relevant services, within and outside the penal institutions can be harnessed to preventing re-offending and facilitate the social rehabilitation of prisoners.
- **The balance between security and citizenship** – Some of the EQUAL innovations in prisons are structural and relate to the management of change in prisons, the introduction of quality systems and the motivation of staff to adopt a more creative, pro-active attitude to the rehabilitation of inmates. Others are concerned with the development of new forms of education and training. Many of these initiatives involve opening up prisons to agencies and individuals, including employers, so that offenders are empowered and prepared to play a more positive part in society on their release.
- **The benefits of European cooperation** – This focuses on collaboration between the various National EQUAL Offender Networks (NEONs) and other networks of projects working with (ex)-offenders. These transnational partnerships provide an effective framework for comparing, analysing and eventually transferring successful practices. Other activities focus on joint production – such as the setting up of a European knowledge portal on rehabilitation issues or the development of a common European IT platform offering non-national prisoners access to learning opportunities which are recognised in their country of origin.

Proposals to Develop EU Guidelines on Resettlement

Up to now, issues related to prisoners’ resettlement have not been strongly reflected at EU level, whereas the Council of Europe has already established a number of recommendations, the last of which being a set of European Prison Rules⁵. Despite the existence of this recommendation, the view expressed by DPs at the Exchange Event in Lisbon was that a set of European Union level guidelines for the re-integration of (ex)-offenders, based on those approaches that had been tried and tested in EQUAL, would have a more effective impact on existing resettlement policies and practices. However, the DPs also felt that whilst there was an opportunity to make a policy impact at national level, there was no EU framework for debate on policy issues and initiatives to which they could contribute and it was suggested that proposals for action on this issue should be discussed with decision makers at the Policy Forum in June.

An Inter-Service Approach to the Issue of (Ex)-offenders

There appears to be considerable value in establishing a framework for discussion involving a wide European network of projects and political actors in the field of resettlement. This would facilitate the generalisation of new practice, which is often dependent on some form of transnational piloting and international authorisation and/or validation and this framework could also lead to the creation a set of guidelines on resettlement.

The Steering Group on mainstreaming good resettlement practices developed within EQUAL is therefore keen to present conclusions from the work of the DPs to, and discuss them with, key actors from the European Commission. The Policy Forum could provide a platform for initiating this dialogue and lead to more sustainable, further action. Such a process would gain immeasurably by the adoption of an inter-service approach involving DG-Employment and Social Affairs, DG-Justice, Freedom and Security and DG-Education and Culture. This would ensure that all the aspects - social, vocational, legal and educational - would be covered in a concerted attempt to improve European and Member State policies and practices for the resettlement of (Ex)-offenders.

⁵ Recommendation Rec(2006)2 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the European Prison Rules - Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 11 January 2006 at the 952nd meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies