A new chance for prisoners in Brazil

A network of civil society organisations to promote the human rights of convicts in Brazil: The expansion and consolidation of the APAC model.

“I changed my life completely. The hands that once destroyed, now build houses.”

Jelletly Aron

Context

Brazil is 4th in the world ranking of prison population. Poor and overcrowded structures and human rights violations hamper the rehabilitation possibilities of inmates. The recidivism rate is around 70%. Among the issues that affect this rate are the lack of education and training. Through European Union support, a project implemented by AVSI Foundation, is helping to rehabilitate prisoners in Brazil to prevent them fall back to criminality.

Objectives

To support a network of civil society organisations to promote the human rights of convicts in Brazil.

To help the expansion and consolidation of the Association for the protection and assistance of the convicted (APAC) model.

Impact

The project has helped 3 000 detainees so far and partners includes the Court of Justice and the State Government of Minas Gerais.
Testimony

APAC is a pioneering methodology in Brazil and a reference worldwide as an alternative to the traditional penitentiary model.

With a troubled childhood and adolescence filled with financial difficulties and a disruptive family life, Jelletly began stealing small things at school: a pencil, an eraser; things he did not have. After a while, he no longer wanted to go to school and began stealing from supermarkets and from people’s backyards, eventually going further with crime, using firearms and getting involved in drug trafficking and drug abuse.

He was caught six times, but as he was a minor, he did not remain in custody for long. When Jelletly entered the prison system, he met other people involved in more serious crime. He was transferred to APAC (Associação de proteção e assistência aos condenados — Association for the protection and assistance of the convicted) located in the city of Perdões, where his mother used to live. This is one of 40 existing APACs in Brazil that practice an alternative methodology of incarceration and rehabilitation, humanising the punishment and preparing offenders to re-enter society.

Without the presence of the police or weapons, prisoners learn to act with APAC staff on a more equal footing and to recover the meaning of some essential values such as society, family, dignity and work. According to Jelletly, he entered APAC as a criminal and left as a recovering human being.

Jelletly reports that he did not know much before being arrested, nor did he have any interest in learning, because he felt that crime gave him what he needed. His only work experience had been to plant and harvest tangerines. He enrolled in a professional course on civil construction, which was offered inside the APAC prison unit. He was one of 300 convicts who graduated in the training courses offered by the project.

Upon his release, with his new skills, he was able to find work in civil construction in his city. “...Those hands that once stole, trafficked and killed the dreams of other people are the same that received the trust of APAC to carry its own cell keys. I learned a lot, from laying bricks to making dough, painting, etc.”

“I now understand that building is an art and know how to create instead of destroy; to help other people accomplish their dreams, for example by building someone’s first home”. Jelletly after serving his sentence keeps going to APAC. Only now he goes as a volunteer, preparing other convicts to face the labour market and society beyond the prison’s walls.