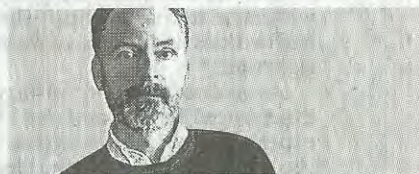


Escaping from rigid prison methods to help inmates



Ian O'Donnell
Opinion

An Ethiopian jail may show the way towards a humane and effective programme of prisoner rehabilitation

When we think of imprisonment a number of images typically come to mind. These include cellular confinement, drug abuse, violence, self-harm and prisoners passing time slowly and unproductively. The overall sense is one of corrupting lethargy and fragile peace.

Prisoners are at risk from each other so devising ways to protect the vulnerable is a constant challenge. Those who have harmed children, accumulated debts they cannot repay or participated in gang feuds pose particular difficulties. Often the solution is to separate them from potential aggressors with the result that they spend prolonged periods in isolation.

Stripped of responsibility and unable to earn money, prisoners cannot support their families or compensate their victims. They live according to a set of rules that has been written, without their input, to control every aspect of their lives.

What would prison look like if the prisoners devised their own rules, elected their own leaders, generated their own

incomes and lived day-to-day largely in the absence of staff?

What if they were required to sleep in dormitories to which they were allocated on the basis of sentence length, with no account taken of their criminal histories or personal circumstances?

This might sound like a recipe for anarchy and exploitation. But during a research trip to Ethiopia I was struck by the extent to which a prisoner society set up along these lines can function effectively in conditions of extreme deprivation.

Earlier this month I travelled to Arba Minch, a town 500km (310 miles) south of Addis Ababa, to interview prisoners and to study how they organise their lives. Over several years Paddy Moran, a Spiritan priest, has introduced a range of innovations to the town's prison. Some have been practical, such as improved sanitary facilities and new classrooms. Others have focused on creative pursuits, such as painting and pottery, and will feature on an upcoming episode of RTE's *Nationwide* programme.

Village operation

Arba Minch prison resembles a small and very busy village. With a population of more than 2,000, 650 of them convicted killers, space is at a premium. The press of people is almost unimaginable, especially at night when the men lie side by side on bunk beds and floors. (Women and their children are housed in a different part of the compound.)

Most prisoners are employed weaving, wood carving, doing embroidery or making fishing nets. Some grow fruit and vegetables and keep bees on a nearby farm. They sell what they produce for cash and a bank visits the prison each week so money can be lodged and withdrawn. Those who earn enough send profits home.

Prisoners outnumber guards by almost

100 to one. But the chaos one might think would accompany such a state of affairs is not evident. There is order, humour and – despite the odds – dignity.

The prisoners elect representatives from each dormitory and appoint their own order-keepers who wear a distinctive purple hat. They have a chairman and executive team who liaise with the prison authorities to ensure the regime operates smoothly. They have an agreed code of conduct which covers everything from personal hygiene to fighting and escape attempts. Breaches result in sanctions such as compulsory exercise drills.

Violence, suicide and drug abuse do not appear to be prevalent. There is a sense of solidarity among the prisoners.

They engage wholeheartedly with the available educational and training opportunities and speak optimistically of lives to be resumed, in due course, outside the prison gates.

“

Paddy Moran, a Spiritan priest, has introduced innovations to the town's prison. Some have been practical, such as improved sanitary facilities and new classrooms. Others have focused on creative pursuits

■ Fr Paddy Moran at Arba Minch prison: the facility resembles a busy village where most prisoners are employed weaving, wood carving or making fishing nets. PHOTOGRAPH: SIMON MURPHY

Like prisoners everywhere, the pain of family separation is felt acutely. It is more pronounced in a place like Arba Minch where even a relatively short distance from home to prison may make visitation impossible if the journey is on foot. The prisoners I met spoke of losing contact with children, of not knowing their whereabouts, and of the yearning to reconnect. If they were not in a position to earn money during their captivity the likelihood that they could maintain family and community ties was slim.

Major challenges confront the Ethiopian criminal justice system at every level. These are intensified at a time of population growth and entrenched poverty. Those who end up in prison must learn to survive in conditions which strike the European observer as extreme.

Mandela rules

One way forward for Ethiopia is to embrace the minimum standards set out in the “Nelson Mandela rules” for the treatment of prisoners adopted unanimously last year by the United Nations General Assembly. These provide a road map to a better future for prisoners wherever they may be held.

But there is learning here for Ireland also, in particular the importance of giving prisoners a measure of responsibility for organising their lives, the value of meaningful work and family support, and the beneficial impact of programmes that unlock the potential for personal growth.

Ian O'Donnell is professor of criminology at University College Dublin

