

Reintegration in the country of origin, a collaborative process that goes beyond the borders of Switzerland

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The Detention and Probation Forum, organized in November 2024 in Bern by the Swiss Centre of Expertise in Prison and Probation (SCEPP), was an opportunity to reflect on best practices in the field of reintegration of foreign prisoners. One of the workshops focused on return assistance programs, particularly those developed in partnership between the International Social Service (ISS) and Project Rescue.

This workshop provided an opportunity to discuss the challenges and best practices relating to the three main phases of the return process for foreign prisoners: the phase of detention in Switzerland, the transition and departure preparation phase, and finally the return and project implementation phase in the country of origin.



Figure 1 - Returnee and local partner in Georgia

During this workshop, repeated twice with a different audience, participants discussed key issues regarding the projects of detainees in Swiss prisons who go back to their countries of origin at the end of their sentence. These exchanges were enriched by interventions and testimonies from the audience, which included representatives of various professional functions involved in one way or another with the theme of prisoner rehabilitation (social workers in prison, chaplain). This allowed broader reflection and new perspectives on the challenges encountered in this field. In connection with Vicente Medeiros' experience, a specific focus was given to cases of return projects to Brazil. This was an opportunity to hear him exchange views with Michèle Demierre, from ISS, on the cases they have jointly handled.

One of the major points to emerge from the discussions was the crucial importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. The professionals involved in the follow-up of returnees

stressed that, to guarantee effective and lasting support, it is imperative to work together, crossing the expertise of social workers, psychologists and other key players. This approach makes it possible to respond comprehensively to the needs of beneficiaries, while ensuring coherent and appropriate follow-up. Another essential dimension highlighted was local fieldwork knowledge, particularly with regard to the cultural, social and economic specificities of the countries of return. Knowledge of local realities enables a sensitive approach that helps avoid misunderstandings and facilitates follow-up in very specific situations. Participants insisted on the need for thorough prior preparation to better understand local challenges, be they political, social or logistical. This not only enables us to better support returnees, but also to anticipate the obstacles they may encounter.

Often, the social referents who work in detention do not have the opportunity to hear from the person once he or she has left. Return assistance programs can, whenever possible, give them an insight into developments and achievements back home. This helps to maintain a link between those working in detention and those involved in post-return monitoring, thereby reinforcing the continuity of support and care for the beneficiaries, and giving access to a global vision. It additionally represents a source of gratification and motivation for the teams working in the Swiss prisons.



Figure 2 - A Return project in Guinea

Finally, the discussions touched on the challenges of medical follow-up, particularly for people with psychiatric disorders. Participants spoke of the difficulties involved in accessing specialized care in certain countries of return, and the limits to guaranteeing appropriate care. Overall, this double workshop gave rise to a series of reflections and suggestions for improving current practices, while highlighting the challenges to be overcome to guarantee humane, personalized and sustainable support for returnees.