

Prison Library project in Georgia
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Background

Libraries and schools are the cornerstones in building of Human Rights and Democracy, which is reflected in international guidelines and policies like the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, Council of Europe Recommendation No. R(87), rec (2006) 2, the European Prison Rules, the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, Education in prison (Council of Europe's 17 recommendations) and IFLA guidelines for library services in prisons.

Prison libraries in Norway

Today prison libraries are widely accepted and a natural and important part of the prison life in Norway. They are very well used and appreciated both by prisoners and staff. To get there has been a long process where one of the most important aspects has been the change of attitude towards prisoners both in the prisons and in society.

The prison library provides a level of "normalcy" in a highly regulated institution. The library presents a window to the outside world through its library material, activities, services and not least their librarians!

It has taken Norwegian Library Authorities more than thirty years to build this service and at the end of 2012 all prisoners should have access to a prison library or other library services.

National policy, economy support and service structure are important factors that affect how, and to what extent, prisoners receive satisfactory library services.

The funding of the prison library services have since 1983 been a separate item in the national budget and administrative responsibility is divided between the Ministry of Justice and the National Library.

The Norwegian Correctional Services finance the prison library premises and equipment, while the National Library administers the prison library services on behalf of the Ministry of Culture. Prison library activities and services are governed by contracts between the participating partners, which state that the prison library is to be run as a branch of the local public library and hence ensure prisoners access to the regular library services.

The legal basis for the prison library system is found in the Norwegian Public Library Act of 1985 and the Execution of Sentences Act of 2001.

Also the parliamentary report, "Straff som hjelper" (Punishment that helps), (St.meld.nr.37) is very supportive of prison libraries and emphasizes the importance of culture in prison daily life!

Oslo Public Library's (Deichmanske bibliotek <http://www.deichmanske-bibliotek.oslo.kommune.no/english/>) prison library unit is with its three libraries, in three different prisons in Oslo, the largest prison library unit in the country. Oslo Public Library has since 1985 established and operated these three prison libraries and thus acquired quite an expertise on the subject.

NORLAG

Since 2004 there has been cooperation between the Norwegian and the Georgian Governments through NORLAG (The Norwegian Mission of Rule of Law Advisers to Georgia). <http://www.norlag.ge/>
The aim of NORLAG is to strengthen the Rule of Law in Georgia. NORLAG closely cooperates with Georgian authorities, institutions and organizations within the field of criminal proceedings and execution of sentence. NORLAG cooperates, on a practical level, with judges, defence counsels, prosecutors, as well as prison and probation officers. The NORLAG Office has 10 staff members; six Norwegian Legal Advisers, one Georgian Legal Adviser, two National Project Coordinators/translators and one office manager/driver. The Norwegian advisers are judges, prosecutors and prison and probation experts.

Georgia has huge prisons with hardly any activities at all for the prisoners. They have a large prison population almost in total passivity, where very little happens with respect to training / education, rehabilitation, harm reduction, preparation for release and return to society.

In 2012 there are approximately 24 000 prisoners in Georgia compared to approximately 4000 in Norway, and both countries has about 5 million inhabitants.

Part of NORLAG's aim is giving prisoners vocational training and employment, ensure that the time spent in prison is rehabilitating and meaningful and prepare prisoners for release and life outside prison in order to prevent re-offending.

One of my colleagues from Bredtveit, the Women's prison in Oslo, went to Tbilisi in January 2009 to work for NORLAG.

Quite early he contacted Deichman to see if they in any way could help starting up libraries in Georgian prisons as a mean of reaching as many of the prisoners as possible and opening up for education.

It warmed my "librarian" heart!! I think the prison library at Bredtveit has done an excellent job, when the first this prison officer thinks about when he meets the Georgian prison system is to start up libraries.

NORLAG and Oslo Public Library applied for grants from IFLAs surplus fund 2009(IFLA the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) administered by NBF (*Norwegian Library Association*) <http://www.norskbiotekforening.no/index.php?c=234&kat>About+us>

We were granted 50.000 NKR for a preliminary project to look into the possibilities of starting up prison libraries in Georgia and connecting it to the public library system if possible. As a result of this preliminary project the City of Oslo, Oslo Public Library applied for and got a grant of 3 750 000 NKR to a three-year project "Library and school in Georgian prisons".

Main project

The Government of Georgia has expressed its will to reform the correctional and legal aid system of Georgia. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has granted Oslo Public Library, based on their competence and experience in prison library policy development, NOK 3 750 000, - to be used to plan, develop and implement a prison library policy in Georgia in cooperation with the MCLA (the Ministry of Corrections and Legal Assistance of Georgia) <http://www.mcla.gov.ge/index.php?lang=eng&lang=eng>

The Goal of the project is to start the process of a national scheme for library and educational services in Georgian Penitentiary Establishments, based on international recommendations for treatment of prisoners and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

The Purpose of the project is to plan and build a pilot library unit at the Penitentiary Establishment for Women, Rustavi #5, based on IFLA's Guidelines for Library services to Prisoners.

Through information, literature and cultural activities, the library aims at giving the inmates increased reading skills, enhancing access to education and leisure activities, facilitating rehabilitation and providing a basis for change of attitude.

The project aims to show the prison authorities the impact that libraries have on prison life and offender programs, become an inspiration for further efforts in the area, and be a model for the development of a national prison library system in Georgia.

The main target group is inmates, but a prison library is also important for the staff and the institution. The library will be able to contribute to employees' development of competence and skills and provide inmates and employees with a common area!

This will help strengthen prisoners' rights and provide a more humane treatment of prisoners. Experiences from Norwegian prisons indicate better working conditions and less trouble in prisons that have good services to the inmates as library, school, work etc.

Extending the library services to the employees also provides a good basis for cooperation between the institution and the library, to overcome the scepticism that the new professions in prisons often are met with and strengthen the interdisciplinary work which is essential in running of a prison library!

Authorities and prison management will be tied closely to the planning and implementation of the library. Staff and inmates should be involved. The library will have jobs for inmates. It will strengthen "ownership" to the library and helps to keep it up and avoid vandalism and destruction!

It is necessary to adapt to prison routines and priorities, and build effective working relations with the prison authority and staff.

The project started up in January 2011. The main part of that year was used to establish a good relationship with the MCLA and to draft a solid agreement between the two parties.

The pilot library is located in the new women's prison outside Tbilisi. There were no free premises for the library and the project had to construct a library building in connection with one of the wings. The construction work started up in November 2011 and was completed in May 2012.

The library was designed by an interior architect and the shelves and furniture were made by a carpenter firm. Two local librarians were recruited and employed.

It's important that we establish a modern, sustainable pilot prison library that the prison authorities in Georgia can afford to take over and run themselves when the project period ends. We decided to use free and open source integrated library system, and chose KOHA,

We have established contact with the Georgian Library Association. They have translated most of KOHA into Georgian and have installed it for us.

The two local librarians came to Norway for a three weeks internship in April, with main focus on lectures and training in KOHA and practical work in prison libraries. Before that they had two weeks internship at the National Library of Georgia, which also have provided the library with their digital material.

The librarians have started their daily work in the prison library with the help of four inmates. Part of the book collection has been purchased and are now being catalogued. Since the Public Libraries in Georgia are not automated, they can not transport catalogue data but have to do all the cataloguing themselves. It will take some time before the lending of books can start, but even so the library is already bustling with activities and everybody is so happy about it! Every day, all day there are several courses and programmes for prisoners both in the conference room and in the library.

The future

If possible, prison libraries should emulate the public library model and be anchored in the public library system, with cooperation between Education-, Culture- and Prison authorities. There are other models where prison authorities run the education and library services. The project will provide guidance in this, but it must be up to the Georgian authorities which model they choose.

The goal is to assist the Georgian government in preparing a general plan for libraries and education in Georgian prisons, and if possible implement some concrete measures before the project period is over.

Public Libraries in Georgia are old fashioned with low budgets and many of them have been closed down lately. They still have card catalogues and closed shelves. Librarians have low status and incredibly poor wages and working conditions.

Currently there is no education in Library and Information Science; it was closed down some years ago. Capacity building and knowledge transfer are important aspects of this project and hopefully it will also have a positive effect on the Public Library System of Georgia.

We hope the pilot library will become a role model and a learning environment for the further development of prison libraries, but also for the public libraries in general.