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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN PRISONS Working Group Meeting

10 December 2020

Risk and Needs Assessment Tools

Key outcomes

This paper presents the findings of the RAN PRISONS meeting on **10 December 2020**, where practitioners involved in risk and needs assessment (RNA) in prisons met. This paper presents the main conclusions and insights of the discussions and provides some key recommendations. In this regard, this paper concerns the practical use of RNA tools within the prison setting, addressing benefits, different possibilities and outlook for the future. Also, prison staff training on risk assessment to improve accuracy of information, motivation and evaluation techniques is something to be considered.

Some key outcomes of this practitioners' exchange are as follows:

- Risk Assessment Tools are **overrated**. Risk and needs assessment involves a way of working where the mentioned tools are just one component with agreed limitations.
- **Prison staff training** is essential, if only to develop effective approaches to obtain information and engage the individual in the assessment and the whole process aimed at reintegration into society.
- Risk assessment involves the detection of **risks**, but also the analysis and management of **needs** of the offender. This is related to the **rehabilitation process**, which is at the core of prison intervention.
- The risk assessment starts with a **good and trustful** relationship with the offender, for which motivated staff is needed. It will lead to a more in-depth knowledge of the individual and there will be more opportunities to support the change needed.

This paper is structured as follows: firstly, an overview of the discussion on RNA tools will be presented as a framework for further discussion; secondly, main highlights of the discussion will be described; thirdly, some recommendations will be mentioned. Finally, relevant practices will be addressed and further reading provided.

Highlights of the discussion

Risk assessment is closely related to understanding and interpreting information in several areas related to an individual in order to predict the likelihood that they will engage in behaviours of concern in the future. This involves the detection of risk factors that could lead to certain behaviours under certain conditions (probabilistic approach). Some highlights of the discussion are briefly mentioned here:

- The need for **useful information collecting tools**, even though not developed as risk assessment tools. In this regard, how to make the best of available information in a practical and effective way seems relevant.
- The importance of **motivation and engagement with inmates** as one of the main challenges to be addressed.
- **Multi-agency cooperation and collaboration with universities and academics** as a helpful way to improve validation and research on existing or adapted instruments. Here, it is worth mentioning the assessment after release from prison and the analysis of external triggers and the social environment as potential risks or protective factors.
- How to understand the **risk of reoffending** and whether instruments can provide accurate information in this sense. What's the role of the predictive component of the existing tools? Do they also foresee a proper investigation about the reasons behind behaviours? Does the lack of a proper consideration of the needs have an impact on the utility of such tools? The social impact of some types of recidivism and the good management of cases.
- **Prison staff training** in RNA and the management of such risk, providing feedback when instruments are applied and improving professional skills to make the best of the rehabilitation process.
- The detection of **concrete needs** in each prison context/service, tailoring procedures in all cases.

There is no doubt that risk assessment seems helpful for the detection and prevention of radicalisation processes, especially at early stages of such pathways. Some current instruments adopt a **structured professional judgment** approach and also differ in terms of the number of risk factors that they include. In fact, some of them specifically enable the assessor to accommodate any other indicator that is deemed relevant to the process. This flexible approach seems necessary in order to provide **dynamic and changeable estimations**. However, needs differ and contexts are also different, as are human and material resources. In this regard, alternative approaches for the risk assessment and the rehabilitation process could be considered.

As pointed out, understanding the individual is quite a long process and it does not seem advisable to reduce the case management to just one instrument. This involves **the whole case**: detention, judgement, sentence and daily interaction in prison, for example. Thus, the detention and post-custodial period also seem relevant for reintegration into society, and how to organise the cooperation with external partners, social agents and law enforcement seems paramount after release. In several countries the multi-agency collaboration is still a challenge, which has a negative impact on the risk and needs assessment. Information sharing among actors who play a role in the whole process (e.g.: security actors and social actors) is still a relevant part of the challenge.

Recommendations

Taking into consideration the main highlights of the discussion, some recommendations for risk assessment are described below:

1. Information concerning the risk needs to be collected in **the most practical and effective way**. This means that RNA tools are helpful, but they should not be considered the only possibility. Structured and agreed procedures, well-designed interviews and efficient protocols are choices to be studied. Analytic tools should not be overestimated and own ways to obtain information need to be studied. RNA tools are just a piece of a holistic case management approach that must not be overestimated.
2. Prison staff needs **training** in several fields, and this is not always provided: the use of developed instruments, the ways to face and cope with reluctant behaviour, how to motivate inmates, the good management of different sources of information, and/or effective therapeutical approaches to inmates are topics to be considered. Such interaction is truly important, and it is closely related to **dynamic security**, which is a new way of understanding security and seems to be fully accepted and recommended.
3. Cooperation with academics, researchers and universities seems paramount, if only to **improve the methodological background** of different approaches. With university collaboration, assessment of the prison population and the risk it poses could be facilitated.
4. The use of instruments and/or **how to provide and share useful information** to agencies and law enforcement after release from prison should be discussed, in order to maximise the possibilities of reintegration into society and minimise the chances of reoffending. Also, it seems interesting to discuss if proper case management can help to reduce the risk of recidivism, involving all relevant professional profiles and sectors.
5. **Practitioners need a "lighter tool"** since most instruments are too complicated and detailed as well as time-consuming. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical evidence on how successful are the existing tools. With shorter and easier risk assessment protocols, there is a clear advantage: the assessment can be done more often.
6. How to **organise teamwork** seems necessary, given the complexity of the matter. Risk assessment involves several actors and information could come from several sources. Here, the role of governors and deputy governors is key, as they should support first-line staff and the assessment process. There are good instruments already in use and most of them provide specific training. However, taking into consideration **local needs and specific resources**, the development of own tools is something to be considered, even though there might be methodological weaknesses.
7. Perhaps, in order to facilitate a broader framework, we should use the term **risk and needs assessment** in prison, instead of risk and needs assessment tools in prison. Risk assessment has to be considered a holistic process, and the assessment both of risks and needs have to go in parallel. The instrument should not be viewed as the main thing, as we need to pay attention to the methodology on the whole: we need to build a **culture of risk assessment** where several actors and procedures play a key role. We should also keep in mind that risk and needs assessment has to be tailor made in each country, as the characteristics of national settings are crucial (e.g.: prison population is different in each country, as well as most diffused forms of extremism).
8. Finally, the more is not always the better. Before delivering risk assessment in any of its forms, **goals should be agreed upon**. Trying to assess as much as possible seems useless if aims are not clear and understood. It seems paramount to tailor interventions and practices to concrete settings and contexts. A one-size-fits-all approach is never a choice.

Inspiring practices

1. Countries such as Norway do not have a specialised extremism tool, but they offer an electronic instrument that serves as a guide for the conversation with sentenced offenders, while respecting criminogenic factors and other relevant ones for their criminal behaviour. The tool involves detainees as agents of their own change that are actively involved in creating a plan for their future. Given such flexibility and the fact that it shows what the inmate could do after prison, this is a good example of a tool that could be used in other countries, as it may be seen as a guide for further case management. Also, there is a wide range of approaches currently implemented. Some countries build their strategies on a collection of measures that is built on the monitoring of inmates during imprisonment, aimed at further analysis and evaluation (Czech Republic). There are also specific assessments carried out, as for the Kosovo Correctional Service, including a rehabilitation programme. This is also the approach adopted by Spain, developing its own programme and instrument.

Follow-up

Some suggestions during the meeting that could be interesting for another event on RNA practices are related to:

- How to cope with reluctant behaviour: effective approaches to engage the individuals in interviews, interventions, and general or concrete assessment of their mindset, personal history and future plans.
- Specific interviewing techniques aimed at making the best of available information, having in mind that some pieces of information will be missed in most cases. Effective methods for collecting information in the most structured and informative way, not necessarily adopting the framework of a risk assessment instrument, but matching professional needs.
- The role of risk assessment in disengagement interventions and how information can be useful to agree on treatment targets. Here, whether to use the term deradicalisation or disengagement could be discussed. At the moment, there seems to be agreement on the approach based on the disengagement of violent behaviour.

Further reading

RAN Specialised Paper [Risk Assessment in Prison](#) (2021)

Monahan, J. (2012). The individual risk assessment of terrorism. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 18(2), 167-205. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025792>

Roberts, K., & Horgan, J. (2008). Risk assessment and the terrorist. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2(6), 3-9. <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/38>

Silke, A. (2014). Risk assessment of terrorist and extremist prisoners. In A. Silke (Ed.), *Prisons, terrorism and extremism: Critical issues in management, radicalisation and reform* (pp. 108-121). Routledge.