

Evaluating Building Bridges: A Social-Ecological Approach

Human behaviour does not exist in a vacuum. Every act you make takes place within several overlapping environmental contexts, each with their own set of rules that govern that behaviour. There are social norms, rules or cultures, logistical and geographical limitations and the wider rules of our society such as laws that sometimes prevent us from executing our own free will – doing exactly what we want to do. This can be imagined as the layers of an onion, with the individual at the centre. The onion only exists because of its many layers. Similarly, human behaviour cannot exist in the absence of these outer social contexts.

This set of contextual constraints exists in exactly the same way for an interaction between two people, such as in the Building Bridges programme. In order for the victim-offender interaction to take place (to exist), a number of other layers surround it and support the existence of the programme. For example, without the support of a prison, Prison Fellowship cannot gain access to prisoners; without a prison culture that supports the concept of rehabilitation and restoration and without the support of the Ministry of Justice, a prison will not designate resources to a new initiative like Building Bridges; and without support for restorative approaches within a society, victims would not be forthcoming and politicians could not justify support for the programme. It is important that these layers should not just be seen as obstacles to overcome but opportunities for the strengthening and expansion of these programmes.

Attempting to understand new initiatives through a social-ecological lens is not a new idea. In fact, it is the dominant model for the field of public health – an area that has been very successful in changing human behaviour (much like we try to do in criminal justice). However, even public health has wasted a great deal of time and money by focusing on one level of an intervention at a time – for example biological and psychological treatments aimed solely at the individual such as nicotine replacement and one-to-one counselling to encourage smoking cessation were largely unsuccessful until public attitudes towards smoking began to change. It was this interaction – pushing (individual desire and efficacy to change) and pulling (social disapproval) forces working together – that permitted smoking prevalence to decrease. So, the **mechanism** of an intervention – how it achieves its goals - is dependent on its environment.

Another useful lesson from public health is the importance of understanding **sustainability**. No matter how effective an intervention is likely to be at motivating an individual to change or in providing the resources, technologies or psychological insight to alter behaviour, this intervention will not last long if it is not build on strong social-ecological foundations. Public health is littered with expensive programmes that showed great promise in their early stages only to find that the success quickly evaporated when initial enthusiasm waned, extra resources became used up or the social norms of the organisation re-emerged.

Therefore, public health has shown us time and time again that interventions that overlook the wider social environment are doomed to failure – either because we never really understand how they work or they simply do not fit into the wider culture in which they exist.

Unfortunately, criminal justice has not yet absorbed these lessons. Past evaluations of restorative justice programmes have focused almost exclusively on the centre of the onion – the interaction between victim and offender. Their questions have been: what effect does the programme have on the likelihood of offenders reoffending; and what effect does the programme have on victims' interpretation of the crime they experienced? While these are valid, important questions that are at the heart of what many restorative approaches, these questions only tell us what was achieved in that single experiment. They can tell us little about the next steps for the intervention and they

assume that the process by which an intervention was developed and implemented and the context in which it was delivered was irrelevant to its success.

A programme that wants to run just once does not need to understand its social environment. However, a project that wants to spread throughout the world – such as Building Bridges – certainly does. The sustainability of the Building Bridges project – keeping it alive and growing – can only be determined through a social-ecological approach.

What can we learn from this holistic approach to evaluation? Firstly, we should acknowledge that no two social-ecologies are the same. Each intervention in the seven countries of this project applied the intervention in slightly different ways to reflect the unique characteristics of their environments. While this may have negative implications for determining the effectiveness of an intervention at the individual level, it reflects the real world and allows us to learn from these processes. By extension, this approach can inform the sustainability of the project by allowing us to identify the techniques that did and did not work in the development of the programmes.

We know that every new project follows a different path to development and each are successful because of the interactions of different factors:

Some interventions are successful because a few key people fought hard against difficult circumstances

Some interventions are successful because there was sufficient political will to remove any local obstacles

Some interventions are successful because the a story in the media about forgiveness inspired a number of volunteers to take part

Understanding the development of an intervention through a social-ecological lens allows us to understand the types of environment that will allow an intervention to flourish

Understanding the development of an intervention through a social-ecological lens allows us to identify obstacles before they occur

By exploring the different evolutions of the programmes, we can examine the ‘external validity’ of the intervention – if an intervention was successfully applied in the Netherlands, is it likely to work in Latvia?

Portugal built their programme from almost nothing. By examining the approaches they used we can advise on the development of a similar programme in Romania.

For the reasons I have outlined, the evaluation of the Building Bridges project took a social-ecological approach. Yes, we measured the psychological and criminogenic changes in offenders, we measured the changes in depression, anxiety and feelings of retribution in victims, but we also spoke to facilitators to learn how the intervention could be improved, we spoke to the Prison Fellowship staff who built these interventions – in several cases from nothing – and we asked them to keep a monthly journal that recorded the challenges they faced and the way in which these obstacles were overcome, we spoke to prison governors and directors who facilitated the delivery of these interventions on their premises, we spoke to public prosecutors and ministry of justice staff who took risks by supporting the use of novel interventions to manage reoffending and we spoke to the directors of restorative justice and victim charities who have offered us insight into how such interventions will be received by victims and the public.

Resources prohibited us from applying this social-ecological approach in all seven countries: so we chose three countries. These countries were chosen with sustainability in mind. Some of the countries in the project had well-established networks and connections to the criminal justice system, some had excellent links to victim support agencies – who were very supportive of the Building Bridges approach and some had weaker support in the victim community or had few links to the criminal justice environment. Each country had some distance to travel and we chose the countries based on those we thought we could learn the most from.

I hope this has been a useful overview of the approach we have taken to our evaluation of the programme. In the workshop to follow, I will describe what we have learned about sustainability of Building Bridges through our case studies. In that presentation I will describe the role played by important stakeholders that allowed the Building Bridges programmes to succeed and I will describe strategies for how sustainable Building Bridges programmes could be implemented elsewhere.