



Pluk

A Platform for Launching System-Wide Parallel Change Labs: the Prisoner Reintegration Lab

THE PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

Issue: Prisoner Reintegration
Geography: The Netherlands
Duration: 2004-present

Impacts: First multi-tier Reos Change Lab: 6 parallel Labs launched. Prisoner Reintegration Lab: Increased resilience in prisoner reintegration system; reduced recidivism; improved matching of the ex-prisoner with society; improved services for ex-prisoners; increased acceptance of ex-prisoners by society as a whole.



HUMAN
CAPITAL



SOCIAL
CAPITAL



INTELLECTUAL
CAPITAL



PHYSICAL
CAPITAL



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A Platform for Launching system-Wide Parallel Change Labs

The Netherlands and Belgium face widespread failures in many different areas, such as public health and education, prisoner integration and participation in society, diversity and economic justice, and energy and sustainability. These issues are complex and systemic in nature, requiring a holistic approach that leverages a diversity of perspectives from across sectors and organisations.

Pluk began as a multi-tier Change Lab in the Netherlands in 2004. The idea was to create a new platform for launching Change Labs that would address a diverse array of systemic social challenges in the country. In order to begin such a sweeping project, the convening team invited stakeholders in the Netherlands to submit their innovative ideas and projects aimed at creating systemic social change. The invitees were selected from a large pool of social change agents who were not only working on complex social challenges,

but also bringing a uniquely innovative approach to their work. These stakeholders were drawn from different sectors (government, business, education, and civil society) and from different levels (local, regional, and national) of Dutch society.

A panel of jurors created a set of criteria to determine whose work would be the best fit for Pluk. Based on these submissions, the organisers initiated a set of Change Lab processes. They developed a collaboration platform to coordinate these primary Change Labs, enabling the different projects to overlap and feed one another, so as to achieve systemic results. This process required participants to spend sufficient time and energy on each issue area, and to carefully steward a broad-level view and communication channels between Labs.

The Change Labs and the Pluk platform were designed in a unique way: Rather than following the traditional planning cycle of most businesses and organisations in the global North, wherein planning and budgeting take place in the autumn, with implementation and programming commencing in the new year, Pluk decided to follow the seasons. By looking at what ideas were beginning to emerge and “sprout” in the springtime, choosing a few ideas to grow and nourish into programs in the summer, harvesting learnings in



the fall, and taking time for reflection and rest in the winter, this “seasonal” prototyping cycle proved to be a success among participants.

The first Change Lab workshop was held in April 2006. By 2008, Pluk’s exposure had grown, resulting in conversations with national-level players to scale up the platform and launch national projects on a new and expanded level. The convening of the national work followed a different trajectory. Rather than inviting submissions from change agents, Pluk jurors selected projects that were excellent examples of innovative social and environmental change. This process was deeply participatory for the Pluk team. Rather than simply designing and facilitating a Change Lab that others would participate in, Pluk designed a Change Lab by going through a Change Lab process themselves. This approach resulted in the launch of six parallel Change Lab processes addressing the following issue areas:

- reducing CO2 emissions in neighbourhoods
- reintegrating former prisoners into society
- increasing cultural diversity and desegregation
- engaging in sustainable urban development
- building a cohesive approach to education
- co-creating community spaces where none exist

After the first year, some of these Change Labs showed significant results while others were still developing. The differing pace of the various processes proved difficult for cross-lab coordination. In order to enable collaboration across labs and maintain systemic impact, Pluk condensed its activities from six to three parallel Change Lab processes. During this transition, the participant pool also drastically changed, with 50% of Change Lab participants coming in who were not there at the beginning of the process.

Reintegrating Prisoners into Society: A Pluk Change Lab

One of the Change Labs convened through the Pluk platform addresses the topic of the reintegration of former prisoners into society after being released from incarceration.

Context

Each year, approximately 35,000 people in the Netherlands are released from prison. Seventy percent of long-term prisoners re-offend within five years. The result is that more former inmates return to prison than successfully find a place in society. This is partly due to the problems that ex-prisoners face when reintegrating into society. The organisers of the Change Lab recognised that to reduce the risk of



recidivism, it is important to understand the factors that lead to relapses in criminal behavior and to create a comprehensive safety net to help those who have been recently released from prison.

Key issues faced by ex-prisoners are affordable and stable housing, steady income through legitimate channels, and health care. Because of difficulty in these and other areas, ex-prisoners often go back to their old patterns of criminal behaviour. A lack of housing or a “nomadic” life is a key risk factor, because it increases the chance of renewed contact with the criminal world; makes it difficult to obtain work, school, and health care; and reduces accessibility to basic services. On the other hand, when stable housing is available, ex-convicts are able to more effectively control their finances and their relationships, and create a barrier between themselves and the criminal world.

The Process

“Matching” Ex-Prisoners with a New Environment

The idea behind this Change Lab project is to create a systemic shift of perspective at every step of the process of reintegration of ex-offenders. This approach does not entail the simple reallocation of resources, but rather seeks to address a broader

“matching problem” between the ex-prisoner and the new environment. A systemic approach to the issue of reintegration would help ex-prisoners take root in their new neighbourhoods, develop virtuous cycles of behaviour, and build the competencies required for successful participation in society. Thus, individual, institutional, and social changes are needed to enable more ex-prisoners to effectively reintegrate into society.

The success of this change depends on the ability of everyone in the reintegration cycle to work together effectively. Everyone in the supply chain must ensure that the ex-prisoner’s risk of relapse is as small as possible.

Unfortunately, at the national level in the Netherlands, massive budgetary cutbacks have affected the prison system. This financial austerity has led to a massive downsizing of probation services. Many probation services have been taken over by social workers, while the rest of the workload has been transferred to municipalities, which are already overburdened and underfunded.

While a system-wide shift is the goal of the project, it is clear that fringe populations will always remain. Although crime cannot be eliminated, we can work to



create the best possible conditions for people who return from detention to resume their lives. These services could include anything from culinary classes to a system of monitoring and support for ex-convicts.

The vision of this Change Lab is to ensure that detainees are able to reintegrate smoothly into society. To this end, the multi-stakeholder group is working to find ways to develop and support the competencies of ex-prisoners in connecting to the society into which they are re-entering. Questions guiding research on the project include:

- What social skills are necessary for an ex-prisoner and how can they be developed?
- What are the social conditions necessary to increase the success rate of ex-prisoner reintegration?
- What are the ingredients and best practices for reintegration and counseling when it comes to matching an ex-prisoner with his or her new environment?

Results

An important result of this project is an increase in resilience in the system. The project has been able to reduce the number of ex-prisoners who are placed in problem situations. In addition, efforts have increased to educate the general public on the importance of social acceptance for those on the fringes of society.

Anyone can be detained for a variety of reasons; anyone can become homeless. For these reasons, the project centers less on prevention of detention and more on the creation of new conditions for ex-prisoners to successfully return to society. The leverage point is the integration of the system as a whole rather than focusing on isolated, individual agents.

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