



# SYSTEMIC THINKING

## IN PREVENTIVE HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORING



A Dossier for National Preventive Mechanisms



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# **Systemic thinking in preventive human rights monitoring**

- A Dossier for National Preventive Mechanisms -

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The Dossier was developed in the framework of the EU Project “Improving judicial cooperation across the EU through harmonized detention standards – the role of National Preventive Mechanisms” implemented by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Fundamental and Human Rights (Austria), in cooperation with the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (Hungary), the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (Bulgaria) and the Associazione Antigone (Italy).

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“Act always so as to increase  
the number of choices.”

Heinz von Foerster

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This dossier was developed in the framework of the EU Project “Improving judicial cooperation across the EU through harmonised detention standards – the role of National Preventive Mechanisms”, implemented by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Fundamental and Human Rights, in cooperation with the Associazione Antigone, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (see in this series, the Project Introduction of the Handbooks).

One of the objectives of this Project was to analyze whether and how the principles and tools of a systemic approach can be used by National Preventive Mechanisms (NPMs) for enhancing their effectiveness and strengthening their role in preventing ill-treatment in prisons. This was done by presenting and discussing the approach with NPMs as well as applying the “systemic tools” during the Project workshops. While the Project proceedings clearly showed the potential of the systemic approach, it also brought to light the challenges and difficulties in making it applicable to concrete NPM work.

By systemic approach/systemic thinking<sup>1</sup> we mean an approach that focuses on systems, i.e. an interconnected set of elements coherently organized in a way that achieves something,<sup>2</sup> and the ways that systems interrelate and interact with each other and their environment. Systemic approaches are increasingly used for inducing and steering organizational change processes, in particular in the business sector. Because of its proven usefulness for understanding and effectively managing complex problems, it has been gradually adopted in other areas where societal change should happen.

1. We use the terms “systemic approach”, “systemic thinking” and “systems thinking” interchangeably.

2. Dana Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (Earthscan 2008) 11.

There are different traditions of applying systemic thinking to problem-solving and organizational development. The systemic approach and, in particular, the tools that we present in this dossier are primarily based on systemic consulting practice that has developed in the German-speaking world,<sup>3</sup> where we have undergone professional education and training with a view to applying it to human rights practice.<sup>4</sup>

This document applies systems thinking to preventive human rights monitoring of places of deprivation of liberty and thus to the work of NPMs. References to a “holistic approach”<sup>5</sup> or the “search for systemic weaknesses”;<sup>6</sup> used in relevant practical manuals, show an awareness within the preventive monitoring community that systemic approaches are relevant to NPMs. In our comprehensive research on follow up to recommendations of NPMs in the EU, NPMs have clearly and strongly recognised the importance of a holistic follow-up strategy in order to effect sustainable change.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the very idea of OPCAT can be seen as systemic. OPCAT bodies explicitly do not focus on individual cases and remedies, but at their underlying root causes and risk factors. From a systemic perspective, the mandate and functions of NPMs can be expressed in the following way:

- To identify systemic and structural fault-lines where torture, ill-treatment and violations of human rights can occur as well as the factors which favour human rights abiding practice.
- To take all effective measures to create structural and systemic change in places of deprivation of liberty, with a view to creating and upholding a culture of human dignity and human rights.

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3. See e.g. Roswitha Königswieser and Martin Hillebrand, *Systemic Consultancy in Organisations* (Carl-Auer Verlag 2016) [hereinafter: Königswieser/Hillebrand]; Ruth Seliger, *The Jungle Book of Leadership: A Navigation System for Leaders* (Carl-Auer Verlag 2014) [hereinafter: Seliger].

4. Moritz Birk and Walter Suntinger, ‘A Systemic Approach to Human Rights Practice’ in Patricia Hladshik and Fiona Steinert (eds), *Making Human Rights Work* (Neuer Wissenschaftlicher Verlag 2019) 649–675 [hereinafter: Birk/Suntinger].

5. Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT) and Inter-American Institute for Human Rights (IHR), ‘Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture: Implementation Manual’ (rev edn, 2010) <<https://www.apt.ch/en/resources/publications/optional-protocol-implementation-manual-2010>> 232 [hereinafter: APT/IHR].

6. Ibid, 68.

7. Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights (BIM) and Human Rights Implementation Center at the University of Bristol (HRIC), ‘Enhancing Impact of National Preventive Mechanisms. Strengthening the Follow-Up on NPM Recommendations in the EU: Strategic Development, Current Practices and the Way Forward’ (BIM 2015) <[https://bim.lbg.ac.at/sites/files/bim/anhang/publikationen/enhancing\\_impact\\_of\\_national\\_preventive\\_mechanisms\\_0.pdf](https://bim.lbg.ac.at/sites/files/bim/anhang/publikationen/enhancing_impact_of_national_preventive_mechanisms_0.pdf)> 92 [hereinafter: LBI-GMR/HRIC].

In the light of the above, the **goal** of this dossier is to show the components of systemic thinking in the field of preventive human rights monitoring, with a focus on places of deprivation of liberty, and more specifically to:

- Present key principles of a systemic approach as they apply to preventive human rights monitoring in place of deprivation of liberty (Part 2).
- Present some useful tools for its concrete application in the work of National Preventive Mechanisms (Part 3).

The **target audiences** of the dossier are primarily (experienced) NPM representatives, other preventive monitors with a special interest in innovative ways for enhancing effectiveness and trainers in preventive monitoring who wish to expand their tool box.

This dossier is best used in combination with a standard monitoring guide<sup>8</sup> as well as with the Handbooks of this series for the specific topics of violence, solitary confinement, prisoners in a situation of vulnerability and requests and complaints.

We are convinced that systemic thinking offers great potential to improve the quality, the processes and the results of the work of NPMs. In the words of an experienced systemic practitioner: “*We achieve better results with fewer resources in more lasting ways*”.<sup>9</sup> This dossier intends to make a concrete contribution to showing and realizing this potential.



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8. See for example: APT, ‘Monitoring Places of Detention: A Practical Guide’ (APT 2004) <<https://www.apt.ch/en/resources/publications/monitoring-places-detention-practical-guide-2004>>.

9. David Peter Stroh, *Systems Thinking for Social change* (Chelsea Green Publishing 2004) 1 [hereinafter: Stroh].

## 2. KEY PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEMIC THINKING AS APPLIED TO PREVENTIVE MONITORING

The systemic approach can be operationalized in 10 principles. The following sections present 1. the meaning of the respective principle, 2. its application in preventive human rights monitoring and 3. concrete questions for monitors who want to apply it. These principles must be seen as interlinked, interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

### 2.1. Begin with the end in mind

#### *Meaning of the principle – the basic idea*

“Begin with the end in mind” is a crucial principle for any change thinking<sup>10</sup> and change processes. It argues for a structured and conscious way of using images of the future for promoting effective change. These images “guide and inspire present-day actions”.<sup>11</sup> The clearer the image of the desired change, the better it is. Metaphorically speaking: It is easier to reach a place if you know what the place looks like. This principle brings purpose, orientation and clarity, thus boosting effectiveness, efficiency and energy.

#### *Application of the principle in preventive monitoring*

While the principle may seem obvious, our experience has shown that it is all too often not applied in practice. Many interventions lack sufficiently clear and explicit goals and/or indicators for their achievement, and, if they exist, these are often not used systematically.

“Begin with the end in mind” is helpful in urging monitors to keep the overall goal of preventive monitoring constantly in mind. It is important

10. Coined by Stephen Covey, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (2nd ed., Simon&Schuster 2004).

11. Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry. A Practical Guide to Positive Change* (Berret-Koehler Publishers 2010) 60 [hereinafter: Whitney/Trosten-Bloom].

to emphasise that the goal is not to make visits and produce reports but to prevent torture, improve treatment of persons deprived of their liberty and create a more human rights abiding culture in detention. In pursuing this goal, NPMs should be systematically impact-oriented. This can begin by developing “concrete long- and short-term strategies in order to achieve the maximum impact on problems and challenges”, as suggested by the SPT.<sup>12</sup> For that purpose NPMs need to make their strategic goals explicit, develop pathways on how to reach them (“pathways/theories of change”),<sup>13</sup> including indicators, and regularly evaluate their work, drawing lessons on how to be more effective. The principle is particularly crucial in the process of drafting recommendations that, by definition, need to be goal-oriented. We would, however, argue that it can and should be applied throughout all stages of NPM work as illustrated by the following questions.

#### Questions for monitors

- Do monitors have a clear image of what their work should achieve in response to the (most) needed changes, e.g. in prisons? How would the achieved change concretely look like?
- How does the preparation of the monitoring visit ensure that all members of the team are clear about the specific objectives of a visit?
- Have indicators<sup>14</sup> been developed to measure whether the goal has been achieved?
- How do monitors actively keep in mind the concrete goal when they do fact-finding?
- How much time do monitors dedicate to drafting recommendations in line with the double-SMART model?<sup>15</sup>
- Have monitors developed a strategy/’pathway of change’ and how does it look like? How much is the strategy used in the daily work and how is it evaluated?
- How strategically minded and impact-oriented are monitors when

12. Subcommittee on the Prevention of Torture and Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (SPT), ‘Analytical Assessment Tool for National Preventive Mechanisms’ (2016) CAT/OP/1/Rev.1, para. 18 [hereinafter: CAT/OP/1/Rev.1].

13. See Building Block 7 of an effective NPM follow-up strategy, in BIM/HRIC, 105.

14. See United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) ‘Human Rights Indicators – A Guide to Measurement and Implementation’ (OHCHR 2012).

15. APT, ‘Making Effective Recommendations: Briefing Paper’ (APT 2008) <<https://www.apr.ch/en/re-sources/publications/making-effective-recommendations-briefing-paper-2008>>.

they take follow-up actions<sup>16</sup> and interventions? It is helpful to systematically ask:

- What is the concrete goal/what should be different after a meeting or workshop with an authority?
- How would you recognise the difference? How would others recognise the difference?

## **2.2. Look at the whole picture instead of focusing only on parts and elements**

### ***Meaning of the principle – the basic idea***

As mentioned, systems thinking focuses on systems and the ways that they interrelate and interact with each other and their environment. Identifying and knowing the broader picture and the interrelatedness of the different systems is crucial for a better understanding of the situation at hand. It helps not getting lost in narrow and ‘silo’ thinking, but leads to thinking ‘outside the box’. Such a holistic look requires conscious efforts to:

- Understand the system by mapping its different elements and how it is embedded in the broader environment.
- Know and map existing stakeholders<sup>17</sup> and the relationships between them (see also Principle 5).

A basic assumption is that the more holistic a view is taken, the more insights on problems and potentials as well as on ideas for effective interventions there will be. A helpful way of bringing this principle to life is to imagine looking through a camera: while undertaking a specific and concrete action (zooming in on the problem), we always take the time to step back and try to observe the bigger picture (zooming out) in which our intervention takes place.

### ***Application of the principle in preventive monitoring***

The relevance of this principle is strongly stressed in preventive monitoring,

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16. BIM/HRIC, 87 et seq.; APT, ‘Strategies and Tools for Effective Follow-Up to Recommendations’ (APT 2019) <<https://www.apr.ch/en/resources/publications/strategies-and-tools-effective-follow-recommendations>> [hereinafter: APT, Strategies].

17. For a description on how to map stakeholders, see Building Block 4 of an effective NPM follow-up strategy: BIM/HRIC, 99.

e.g. by APT's insistence on seeing "visits to places of detention ... (as) the first step of a holistic preventive strategy (which includes the analysis of) ... the legal framework, public policies, and institutions and actors involved."<sup>18</sup> In order to do so, it helps to specifically consider the different dimensions (or "zoom levels" if you will) which are relevant for the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty and the conditions of detention:<sup>19</sup>

- The concrete functioning and management of the respective place of detention
- The higher organisational/institutional arrangement, e.g. the ministry, the central prison administration
- Law
- Public policies, e.g. with regard to public security
- Public awareness.

#### Questions for monitors

- How clear are the dimensions in which change needs to take place? Are they clearly articulated in the monitor's strategy for change?
- How much time is spent working on the different dimensions to achieve the desired change?
- What dimension is addressed least? Why?
- In particular, how are the dimensions of public awareness and public policies worked on?
- How can neglected dimensions be strengthened in a strategic approach?

### 2.3. See relations and connections instead of singular events/actors

#### *Meaning of the principle – the basic idea*

While the previous principle asks us to 'look at the big picture', this principle directs us to explicitly focus on relationships and connections instead of singular events and actors. The fundamental idea of systems thinking is that everything is interconnected: Events, actors, structures

18. APT/IIHR, 234.

19. See BIM/HRIC, 93, where we have discussed these dimensions/levels as part of a systematic change perspective to NPM follow-up actions.

etc. are intrinsically tied together, influencing each other dynamically. Such a relational view of the social world counteracts the general tendency to focus on single events, situations and actors. This view also helps to deepen the analysis of problems, which, systemically, “*are not objects, but processes that comprise interaction and communication*”<sup>20</sup> between different (groups of) actors. Systemic consulting practice has developed a set of questions that help explore the different dimensions of a problem – including the perceptions and interests of different actors involved – and help identify entry points for possible solutions.

### ***Application of the principle in preventive monitoring***

This principle urges preventive monitors to specifically look at the relational dynamics behind a problem they encounter. Two examples should serve to illustrate this:

Often, monitoring reports spend a great detail on describing the deficits of different actors but less on the relationships between them. However, it is often the relationships between actors that contribute to the continuation of problems, e.g. cases of torture not being effectively investigated because of faulty relationships between police, prosecutors, judges. And solutions may lie rather in improving their cooperation than focusing on each of these actors individually, ignoring their relationships.

Another example comes from a deep-seated structural problem in Austria, the long lock-up hours in prisons and its negative consequences on human rights.<sup>21</sup> The problem might best be understood by looking at the processes and interests behind it. The long lock-up hours were the result of a successful action for better working hours by the prison staff union in the 1990ies. This led to a shortening of “day time” in prison to around 15.00, when night shift starts. Despite the CPT’s and the NPM’s recommendations to increase the staffing levels, to change the staff shift system and to change the approach of staff to their duties on the wings, the situation has not improved. This would require a deeper look into the dynamics behind this

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20. Arist von Schlippe and Jochen Schweitzer, *Systemic Interventions* (Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht 2015) 54 [hereinafter: Schlippe/Schweitzer].

21. For a succinct description see European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) ‘Report on the Visit to Austria’ (2010) CPT/Inf (2010) 5, para. 71 [hereinafter: CPT/Inf (2010) 5].

problem, in particular the interests of and relationships with the powerful prison staff unions. In order to find a lasting solution to this problem, a strategic communication approach with staff should be devised which takes their needs and interests seriously.

#### Questions for monitors

Monitors could deepen their analysis of a human rights problems by asking the following questions:

- When did the problem start? How did it evolve?
- Which events/situations/actors form part of the problem?
- What are the relationships between different actors that might cause or contribute to the problem?
- How do different actors see the problem? What is the difference in perspectives and why?
- Which (competing) interests are involved in the problem? How could they be brought together?
- Are there comparable situations where the problem does not exist or has been solved and which could serve as good practice?

## 2.4. See circularity: causes are effects and effects are causes

### *Meaning of the principle – the basic idea*

Closely linked to the relational principle above, systemic thinking stresses that complexity, circular causality and unpredictability characterize (social) life. We commonly think: “If I do A – B happens.” In contrast, systemic thinking posits that most phenomena of life, including communication, occur in “*reciprocal feedback loops*”<sup>22</sup> where cause and effect become indistinguishable: cause is always effect and effect is always cause. As the pioneer in communication theory, Paul Watzlawick famously described in the example of a relationship between a man and a woman: he says: “I withdraw because you nag” and she says: “I nag because you withdraw”, their behaviour becoming both feedback and trigger within the communication.<sup>23</sup>

22. Seliger, 50–53.

23. Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes* (W.W. Norton & Company 1967) 56.

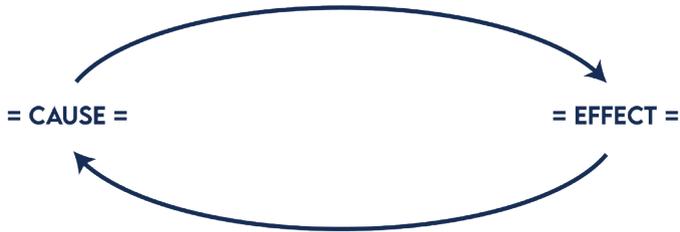


Figure 1: Cybernetic Control Loop

Being attentive to circularity in human communication and behaviour is central to understanding complex problems.

**Application of the principle in preventive monitoring:**

The application of this principle is crucial for deepening the understanding of social life in prison, which, in turn, is the basis for effectively contributing to change. Strongly based on linear thinking, prisons attempt to control life through hierarchy, rules and enforcement, but clearly fail to do so in a satisfactory way. Instead, prison life produces a rich informal dimension.<sup>24</sup> Circularity manifests, inter alia, in the following ways.

Despite the clear hierarchy between staff and prisoners, circularity suggests that there is strong co-dependency between prison staff and the inmates. In our experience, prison staff on the wings is vividly aware of this.

Circularity also plays a major role in understanding security in prisons. Tightening of security measures can lead to the very problems it aims to combat: Rebellion might be a consequence of the life of inmates getting restricted and their autonomy not respected.<sup>25</sup> This is a good example

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24. The former prison director and systemic consultant, Wolfgang Gratz, describes the situation in the following way: "As non-trivial circular steering processes are not provided for (e.g. through jointly negotiated agreements) or are even prohibited, non-trivial steering .... takes place in informal and/or illegal ways", Wolfgang Gratz, *Im Bauch des Gefängnisses. Beiträge zur Theorie und Praxis des Strafvollzugs* (2nd edn, Neuer Wissenschaftlicher Verlag 2008) 174 (translation by the authors).

25. Frieder Dünkel, 'Der deutsche Strafvollzug im Internationalen Vergleich', Presentation in the Conference „Das Gefängnis als Lernende Organisation“ (27.-29. November 2002).

of “a reinforcing circle of causality.”<sup>26</sup> The concept of dynamic security as referred to in the European Prison Rules (51.2) and the UN Mandela Rules (76 1c) essentially embodies such a circular understanding of security.<sup>27</sup>

### Questions for monitors

- Which examples of circular dynamics can be identified behind a current problem? How does this change of perspective affect your understanding of the problem and possible solutions?
- How could a circular understanding be integrated in the daily work of monitors:
  - In the analysis of problems?
  - In interviews with detainees and conversations with prisons management and staff?
  - In the elaboration of recommendations?
  - In the design of strategic follow-up action?

## 2.5. Seek actively and integrate different viewpoints and multiple perspectives

### *Meaning of the principle – the basic idea*

This principle is crucial for implementing the previous ones. How is it possible to see the big picture, the relational aspects and circular dynamics of complex problems? By talking to as many stakeholders as possible, taking them seriously and accepting their perspective as relevant to understanding the situation as well as to devising sustainable strategies for change. This emphasis on the relevance of different perspectives is based on constructivist thinking. “Everything said is said by someone”<sup>28</sup>

26. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (2nd edn, Currency Doubleday 2006) 80.

27. For more detailed information on the concept, see United Nations Office of Drug and Crime (UN-ODC), ‘Handbook on Dynamic Security and Prison Intelligence’ (United Nations Publication 2015) 31.: „Security also depends on an alert group of staff who interact with, and who know, their prisoners; staff developing positive staff-prisoner relationships; staff who have an awareness of what is going on in the prison; fair treatment and a sense of “well-being” among prisoners; and staff who make sure that prisoners are kept busy doing constructive and purposeful activities that contribute to their future reintegration into society. This concept is often described as dynamic security and is increasingly being adopted globally.”

28. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge* (Shambhala 1992) 27.

Ultimately, knowledge of the world is nothing but our own personal construction. There is no such thing as “objective” knowledge. The person and medium of observation influence the results of the observation.

This principle has two important practical consequences.

- One has to internalize awareness that one’s own position and perspective is only one among many others and not to be tempted to assume them as certain.
- One has to actively seek and engage with the perspectives and interests of other actors and take these seriously as other relevant views of reality.

### ***Application of the principle in preventive monitoring***

The importance of this principle is readily accepted in monitoring practice. It is now common sense that conscious effort should be made to not only interview inmates and prison management, but to constructively engage also with prison staff, social services providers, prison psychologists, relevant NGOs etc. in order to get their viewpoints on concrete situations encountered, including the root causes of torture and ill-treatment, as well as possible solutions. Also, the need to engage in “a dialogue with other relevant national and international actors, including civil society” for the purpose of following up to recommendations is regularly stressed.<sup>29</sup> However, in many countries the dialogue with civil society could be expanded and used more systematically. This includes using the full potential of special advisory boards/consultative councils. Overall, systemic thinking strongly highlights the need to apply this principle in a very methodical, conscious and self-reflective way. For that purpose, it may be useful to explicitly evaluate the existing cooperation and consider possibilities to improve the existing channels of communication.

#### **Questions for monitors**

- How much time do monitors dedicate to interviews with prison staff, social services etc.? Does the broad choice of interlocutors form an explicit part of the preparation of the visit?

29. CAT/OP/1/Rev.1, para. 36.

- When strategizing about follow-up action: Are relevant stakeholders explicitly mapped and analysed in terms of their power and interest in implementing or opposing a change recommended by the NPM?<sup>30</sup>
- Do NPMs engage explicitly and systematically in networking and cooperation with other actors in order to enhance implementation of their recommendations?
- How do external actors, especially civil society, view the cooperation with the NPM and how could it be improved?
- In which way do NPMs include relevant skills in training programmes for monitors?
  - Active listening for understanding the situation and perspectives of others (beyond training of interviewing persons deprived of liberty).
  - Establishing good/professional communication with all groups/ stakeholders relevant to monitoring.
  - Acting with keen appreciation of the dignity of all stakeholders, including staff.

## **2.6. Look at the “bottom of the iceberg” and understand underlying cultural patterns**

### ***Meaning of the principle - the basic idea***

With a view to obtaining ‘the whole picture’ a systemic approach pays particular attention to what “cannot be seen”. This is commonly illustrated with the iceberg metaphor: while we focus on the ten percent above the water – mostly events and outcomes – it is important to take into account the 90 percent below the surface, the bottom of the iceberg. For a deeper insight into the application of the iceberg model to monitoring of prison violence (see in this series, the Handbook on Monitoring Prison Violence).

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30. See BIM/HRIC, 99-101.



Figure 2: Iceberg

The iceberg metaphor is helpful for not getting caught up only in those aspects of a situation that are visible: the concrete events and outcomes, the formal structures, the operational procedures. While these are obviously important, the whole picture of a problem cannot be understood without seeing the important factors which contribute to its existence and perpetuation that are not visible at first sight. So, in addition to the events and outcomes (What happened?), the trends and patterns that consist of repeated/linked events and outcomes (What's been happening) need to be looked at. At a deeper level then, non-formal structures, power dynamics and mental models come into focus, as they have great relevance to 'organizational realities'. In particular, systemic thinking stresses the need to understand organizational culture in an adequate way. Culture can be seen as **"a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems"**.<sup>31</sup>

31. Edgar Schein, *Organisation Culture and Leadership* (3rd edn, Wiley 2017) 17 [hereinafter: Schein]. Emphasis added.

### ***Application of the principle in preventive monitoring***

This principle explicitly urges preventive monitors to go beyond the concretely visible situations, events and structures. Obviously, poor material conditions of detention and other directly observable issues, such as lack of space for meaningful activities in prison, are important subject matters monitors will deal with. But: what leads to these conditions, what lies below their surface and what role do cultural patterns play?

The detention monitoring tool “*Institutional culture in detention: a framework for preventive monitoring*” by APT and PRI provides useful guidance in this regard.<sup>32</sup> This paper analyses cultural risk factors for torture and ill-treatment, presents methods/ways to contribute to organizational culture change and identifies relevant drivers and contributing factors to such change. It also presents a well proven model for deciphering cultural issues within places of detention.<sup>33</sup>

In order to illustrate this point: the CPT has repeatedly stated that improvement in detention conditions requires a change of the self-understanding of prison staff as well as of the societal understanding of their role “*as performing a public service, not an administrative function*”.<sup>34</sup> Obviously, these are issues that are difficult to tackle and which require thorough strategic thinking on how to bring about change.

#### **Questions for monitors**

- How much time is dedicated to this deeper analysis of the situation (like institutional culture in prisons)? Do these issues form an explicit part of the preparation and carrying out of the visit?
- To which extent do reports and recommendations address these cultural issues?
- Are cultural issues explicitly taken up in the dialogue with the authorities and other actors?

32. APT, Penal Reform International (PRI), ‘Institutional Culture in Detention: A Framework for Preventive Monitoring’ (2nd edn, Penal Reform International 2015) <<https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/culture-in-detention-2nd-ed-v6.pdf>> [hereinafter: APT/PRI].

33. Ibid., 5 et seq.; distinguishing three levels of cultural analysis, based on Schein, 1: Analysis of artefacts, 2. Analysis of espoused beliefs and values, 3. Analysis of underlying assumptions.

34. See e.g. CPT/Inf (2010) 5, para. 71.

· In which way does your NPM include skills of cultural analysis in training programmes for monitors?

## **2.7. Look at failures in the system, not in persons**

### ***Meaning of the principle – the basic idea***

The invisible structures and cultural patterns, analysed under 2.6., are not only important as such. Systemic thinking highlights that they play a particularly important function: they make a system stable, they guarantee that the system/organization ‘works’ and ‘survives’. This fundamental function of structures and cultural patterns also means that individuals only take on a role that is negotiated within and assigned by the system and serves to maintain it. Many know this common phenomenon well: exchanging a person within an organisation or hiring a new person does not necessarily solve an existing problem and achieve the desired results. Rather, a new person is likely to adopt the same behaviour as her/his predecessor, acting out the role which is assigned by the ‘systemic forces’.

Therefore, a systemic perspective looks at the stabilizing factors that exist within a system and tries to identify possible failures constituting systemic risks, i.e. structures and cultural patterns that produce human rights problems and that are particularly difficult to change. This also means that the analysis of problems is not focused on person and personal dispositions but primarily on situational and structural factors.<sup>35</sup> This principle serves to counteract the well proven human tendency of blaming persons rather than seeing the effects of situational and systemic forces.

### ***Application of the principle in preventive monitoring***

This principle helps to better understand the situation at hand and guards us against falling into the trap of personalizing problems, with three key positive consequences:

- It helps communication with authorities as it avoids the pitfall of “blaming” language. Thereby it facilitates the development of a constructive relationship with decision-makers, the understanding of

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<sup>35</sup> This is strongly supported by insights from social psychology; see Philipp Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect, Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (Random House 2007) [hereinafter: Zimbardo].

the circumstances under which they operate, and the identification of the systemic factors causing the problems.

- It leads to a realistic understanding of what to expect from individual persons operating in a system that strongly defines their behaviour.
- It helps to elaborate recommendations that focus on the systemic risk factors which are relevant for coming to grips with a particular problem and – if implemented – can create sustainable impact.

In fighting impunity for torture, this highlights the need to complement the demand for individual responsibility of perpetrators with an analysis of the systemic and organizational factors, including leadership failures and cultural patterns, which tend to make these cases possible. This also guards against the frequently used theory of “rotten” apples which is used by political leaders to fend off responsibility for their contributions to the occurrences of torture.<sup>36</sup>

#### Questions for monitors

- To which extent do you explicitly take into account the particular role that prison staff and management play?
- How can you better understand in which way the behaviour of prison staff and management is strongly influenced by systemic factors?
- How does this understanding affect your attitude towards and communication with prison staff and management?
- How is this understanding integrated in your analysis and recommendations?
- How can this understanding be integrated in the follow-up strategy?
- In which way does your NPM include relevant skills in training programmes for monitors?
  - Understanding of the relevance of roles for explaining behaviour (using insights from psychology/sociology)
  - Identification of systemic failures instead of attributing problems to personal deficits (“fundamental attribution error”)

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36. Ibid.

## **2.8. Look at resources and strengths, not only deficits**

### ***Meaning of the principle - the basic idea***

While the previous principles have focused on better understanding systemic failures and problems, this principle explicitly looks at the strengths and resources that exist in any system. This is an important complementary perspective to the deficit-oriented view which is still the default mode to analyze and seek change of the social world. Such a perspective allows to appreciate the existing state of affairs, to bring to light the positive things that have not been seen before, with a view to best using them for achieving the desired goal. Moreover, a focus on resources has a well proven energizing effect.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Application of the principle in preventive monitoring***

This principle can have a very strong effect on preventive monitoring and, more generally, in human rights practice. Human rights monitoring risks to conclude with a long list of deficiencies identified, often entailing a depressing view of the situation. Such conclusion is highly discouraging for the authorities operating under difficult circumstances but can also have a negative effect on the energy of the monitoring team, thus leading to a ‘monitoring fatigue’ on both sides. Moreover, a deficit focus risks to lose sight of the aspects that work well and on which change could be built. On the other hand, we have made the experience that even in a situation where authorities claimed to be helpless vis-à-vis a problem focusing on strengths and resources could help. In the case of prison violence, focusing on what works well can bring to light already existing positive approaches of de-escalation and motivate authorities by showing that change is possible.

Preventive monitoring practice is clearly aware of the necessity of integrating a focus on resources. The SPT explicitly exhorts NPMs to identify good practices and to include them in their reports.<sup>38</sup> And many NPMs already include references to good practices in their visiting and/or annual reports. Such a focus is highly important in view of the need to establish a constructive dialogue with the authorities.

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37. Whitney/Trosten-Bloom, 67 et seq.

38. CAT/OP/1/Rev.1, para. 30.

Furthermore, there are NPMs who have started to integrate specific tools for identifying the positive aspects in their general working methods. Inspired by the work of the Cambridge criminologist Alison Liebling (see below 3.4), the Portuguese NPM has included this focus in its work in two ways. In a guidance document for conducting general monitoring visits,<sup>39</sup> the Portuguese NPM explicitly exhorts monitors to ask also for positive moments and experiences that detainees might have in prison. Furthermore, it uses an adapted version of Liebling's 'Measuring the Quality of Prison Life' questionnaire,<sup>40</sup> which contains such a focus, for a more in-depth analysis of prison life. For more information on that see in this series the Handbook on Monitoring Prison Violence.

#### Questions for monitors

- To which extent is the identification of good practice an explicit focus during monitoring visits?
  - Are positive aspects of prison life included in interviews with prisoners?
  - Are positive aspects of prison life included in interviews with prison staff, prison management?
  - How can interviews focusing on positive aspects be strategically used for establishing a constructive dialogue with prison staff, prison management and other authorities?
- In which way do visit reports include good practice examples and positive experiences?
- Are good practices used for the elaboration of recommendations with a view to strengthening these practices and/or using it in other places?
- Are good practices strategically used in devising and carrying out follow-up actions?

39. Provedor de Justiça, Objeto de visitas genéricas a Estabelecimentos Penitenciários (unpublished document with the authors).

40. Alison Liebling, Prisons and their Moral Performance. *A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life* (Oxford University Press 2004).

## 2.9. Look for entry points and connections, while recognizing the limits of intervention

### *Meaning of the principle – the basic idea*

Systems thinking recognises that social systems have a life of their own, are self-regulating and autonomous.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, they cannot be directly controlled and/or changed from the outside but change needs to happen ‘from within’. This brings a helpful realistic understanding of what external actions/interventions can actually achieve. This does not mean, however, that we cannot induce any change from the outside but rather it highlights the need for such interventions to be very carefully and strategically conceived and implemented. Against this background, a systemic approach can offer innovative ways of strategizing:

- It explicitly searches for high-leverage interventions which use limited resources for maximum and lasting improvement.<sup>42</sup>
- It tries to identify and/or create ‘windows of opportunity’ for policy changes, e.g. in the course of dramatic events which highlight the significance of a problem or when favourable political constellations develop.<sup>43</sup>
- It pays specific attention to presenting and framing of communication in order to enhance its connection with and acceptability<sup>44</sup> to the target audience (e.g. the authorities, media, the general public).<sup>45</sup>
- At the same time, systemic thinking is weary of quick fixes or attempts to solve problems by increasing pressure, which might have adverse unintended consequences.
- Importantly, systemic thinking helps differentiate between different modes of interventions according to where the problems are located along the dimensions of the iceberg – model. In addition to ‘technical’ changes on the surface, it explicitly envisages change of patterns, paradigms and culture.<sup>46</sup>

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41. Adapted from Birk/Suntinger, 663.

42. Stroh, 2.

43. BIM/HRIC, 97-98.

44. Königswieser/Hillebrand, 37, speaks of „connective ability” as a principle for systemic consulting processes.

45. E.g. framing human rights abiding police behaviour as police ‘professionalism’ has proved to be helpful in police trainings; for other examples see BIM/HRIC, 98.

46. Seliger, 100. See also the discussion of “levels of analysis” and corresponding “modes of action” in Daniel Kim, *Introduction to Systems Thinking* (Pegasus Communications Inc. 1999) 17.

### ***Application of the principle in preventive monitoring***

This principle touches upon the core of the self-understanding of monitors. It helps put monitoring in a realistic perspective and, at the same time, enhances the prospect of successful interventions. Many monitors share the following experience: despite of all their efforts, change is elusive or, at least, does not happen quickly. This might easily lead to frustration or resignation. Keeping the 'autonomous nature' of systems in mind can bring an immense relief as it takes away the pressure of having to achieve immediate change, a wish all too understandable in the light of the suffering which preventive monitors confront.

At the same time, this principle asks monitors to improve strategic thinking, carefully plan change interventions, and act in order to observe and identify short-term 'windows of opportunity' to achieve change on the mid- and long-term.

This principle is particularly relevant when elaborating recommendations and devising strategic follow-up actions. Helpful and practical approaches to strategic work in these areas are found in the publications of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights/Bristol University Human Rights Implementation Center<sup>47</sup> and the APT.<sup>48</sup>

#### **Questions for monitors**

- To which extent is the elaboration of recommendations part of a mid- and longer-term strategy (or 'pathway of change')?
- How does the follow-up strategy ensure that priority areas with possible 'high leverage' are identified? How is high leverage for change identified?
- In which way do monitors consciously look for possible 'windows of opportunity' for achieving the desired change and how are these acted upon?
- What follow-up tools other than visits are being used by monitors/ the NPM (e.g. meetings with authorities etc.)?

47. See BIM/HRIC, 101 et seq.

48. APT, Strategies.

- In which way does the follow-up strategy ensure that the most effective tools and instruments for achieving the desired change are identified and used?<sup>49</sup>
- In which way do monitors ensure that their communication strategies (reports, recommendations, follow-up) are shaped in a way so as to achieve a higher acceptance by the respective target audiences (e.g. prison staff, management, media general public)?

## 2.10. Include ongoing reflection and self-reflection

### *Meaning of the principle – the basic idea*

The systemic approach is adamant on integrating phases of reflections, including self-reflection, throughout all work processes. Why do we work like this? Why do we think that the way chosen best achieves the desired results? This emphasis on reflection is at the same time the strongest source of (self-reflective) organizational learning with a view to achieving greater impact. Metaphorically speaking, it is going on the balcony in order to observe oneself acting on the dance floor.<sup>50</sup>

This principle forces us to critically examine our own assumptions and possible biases. It leads us to question what has been accepted as a given and “the ways things have always been done in the past”. Not surprisingly, this element of self-critical examination is set to meet with resistance, as it might shake up entire belief systems, and this may be painful and people might feel vulnerable and exposed.<sup>51</sup> However, it is through permanent (self-)reflection only – testing our views and seeing them as views constructed by ourselves – that we enable growth and improvement towards achieving maximum impact.

Systemic consulting practice has produced many concrete tools for reflection, including the “systemic loop” (see 3.2) and „peer consulting“

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49. See BIM/HRIC, 101 et seq.: Building Block 5: Reflecting on availability and suitability of tools for follow-up action.

50. See Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Harvard Business School Press 2002).

51. See Senge, 262.

(see below 3.5). Additional useful tools can be found in the ten building blocks of a systematic change perspective that we have proposed in earlier work, which include “Monitoring of implementation” and “Evaluation.”<sup>52</sup>

### ***Application of the principle in preventive monitoring***

The SPT has been very clear in exhorting NPMs to engage in constant reflection and self-reflection. It considers “the development of national preventive mechanisms (...) an ongoing obligation, with formal aspects reinforced and working methods refined and improved incrementally.”<sup>53</sup> In order to assist NPMs in this task of “self-evaluation”, it has prepared an “analytical tool for national preventive mechanisms”. This analytical tool “urges existing national preventive mechanisms and States parties to carry out self-evaluations systematically and periodically and improve their activities to bring them into line with the guidance compiled in the present tool.”<sup>54</sup>

A systemic approach would suggest that NPMs use professional methods and tools for engaging in self-reflective strategizing.

Several NPMs have established advisory boards, which could be used as “sounding board” for systematic reflection and evaluation. However, it appears that this crucial role has not yet been developed in practice.

Evaluations in NPM practice seem still rare, but examples and evaluation frameworks slowly develop. The UK NPM was one of the first to engage in a self-evaluation process on the basis of analytical assessment tools of the SPT<sup>55</sup> and sends out an annual survey to cooperation partners. An ambitious approach has been developed by Richard Carver and Lisa Handley on the basis of their work for the Georgian NPM.<sup>56</sup>

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52. BIM/HRIC, 107.

53. CAT/OP/1/Rev.1, para. 5.

54. Ibid., para. 6.

55. UK National Preventive Mechanism, ‘Self-assessment of the UK NPM’ (UK NPM 2015).

56. Richard Carver and Lisa Handley, ‘Evaluating National Preventive Mechanisms: A Conceptual Model’ (2020) 12(2) Journal of Human Rights Practice (JHRP) 387–408.

### Questions for monitors

- To which extent is strategic reflection systematically included in the preparation of the monitoring visit?
- What is the practice of debriefing after visits? Immediately afterwards? On thematic issues? On methods of visits? Does this include critical reflection of one's own performance? What is the practice of feedback within the monitoring team?
- To which extent does the process of report writing allow space for thorough reflection on the findings as well as on SMART recommendations?
- What is the organizational arrangement for reflection and self-reflection within the NPM?
- Are regular retreats used for this purpose?
- Does the NPM offer relevant training in reflection/self-reflection tools (e.g. how to give and receive feedback)?
- What evaluation processes for determining the impact of NPMs exist?

### 3. SPECIFIC TOOLS

#### 3.1. The Change-Formula – a simple model of change

Systemic consulting practice has produced a number of tools for structuring change processes. In our work, a very simple model has proven to be of great use in strategizing: The Change Formula.

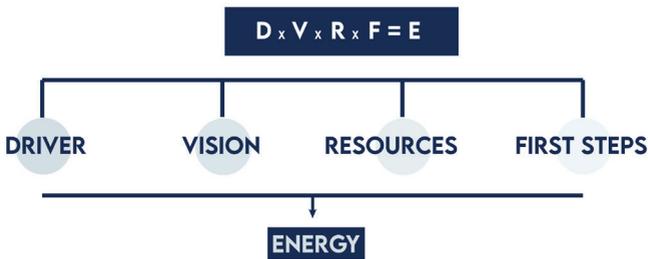


Figure 3: The Change-Formula

The Change-Formula<sup>57</sup> helps structure a process of strategy development in a very effective way. It provides a clear direction and purpose, a clear frame for the process and sufficient flexibility for creative thinking. Along these steps, energy can be mobilized in order to overcome challenges and resistance to change.<sup>58</sup> It can be used in a variety of settings that are of relevance to NPMs, from designing a follow-up strategy regarding NPM recommendations to elaborating capacity-building measures.

**D - Driver:** This is about the why of change? Is there a “sense of urgency”,<sup>59</sup> because the problem is of a pressing nature or because

57. See Oliver Schrader and Lothar Wenzl, *Die Spielregeln der Führung* (Schäffer-Poeschl Verlag 2015), 153 et seq.

58. Steven Cady and others, ‘The Change Formula: Myth, Legend, or Lore?’ (2014) 46(3) *Organizational Development Practitioner*, 32–39 [hereinafter: Cady and others].

59. John P. Kotter, *Accelerate* (Harvard Business Review Press 2014) 27.

a window of opportunity has opened up? D stands for clarifying the basic motivations and, in particular, for identifying priority issues to be addressed by the NPM.

**V – Vision:** What is the change we want to see? Very concretely! Vision paints a picture of the situation when the problem has been solved (see principle 1).

**R – Resources:** What are the available resources, strengths, etc. that can be used for achieving this vision? On the one hand, R helps unearth and appreciate the resources and strengths that already exist. On the other hand, R helps identify which further resources are needed to attain the vision (see principle 8).

**F – First Steps:** What are good first steps to take in order to create early success and thus a sense of “feasibility”? F looks at what needs to be done and helps decide on what to do next.

**E – Energy:** The simplicity and no-nonsense quality of this process helps mobilize energy. Its effectiveness is well proven in systemic consulting practice.

The Change Formula has proved to be an effective tool<sup>60</sup> and can be applied flexibly and strategically: When one of the 4 requirements is missing, the NPM can consider how it can be met (e.g. by creating a sense of urgency for D) or else reconsider the priority or even feasibility of the desired goal.

### 3.2. The systemic loop – a useful process model

The systemic loop constitutes a simple and effective model for integrating the systemic principles into work processes. The main idea behind is: “We have to begin by collecting information, building hypotheses and reflecting, not by taking immediate action.”<sup>61</sup> This is done in a circular movement of analyzing, reflecting, acting and so forth. Application of the systemic loop leads to more conscious analysis, strategy and actions.

60. Cady and others.

61. Königswieser/Hillebrand, 45.

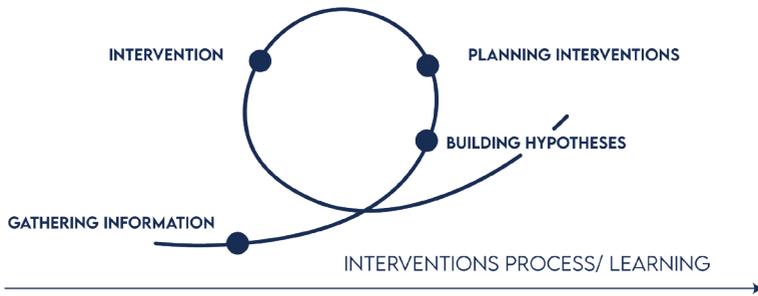


Figure 4: The systemic loop process model.<sup>62</sup>

The systemic loop highlights the importance of constant reflection and (self-) reflection. This is done through “Building hypotheses” (or “Clarifying assumptions”), which is a critical part of systemic practice. This critical reflection is also a feature of “Theory-of-change” approaches, nowadays in common use.<sup>63</sup> Importantly, this includes looking at one’s own role in the process.

Basically, hypotheses are assumptions about connections and relational patterns that need to be tested. “Systemic hypotheses describe relationships, interaction, reciprocal effects and processes, they refer to different contexts, focus on resources and solutions and often seem unconventional. They try to uncover the hidden meaning behind problems. They have explanatory power.”<sup>64</sup> The systemic functions of hypotheses are two-fold:

- They help systematise and prioritise information
- They stimulate thinking about options for intervention.

The tool of hypothesizing can be extremely helpful, both for the purpose of describing a problem (“The reason for the negative attitude of staff towards detainees could be their poor working conditions...”) as well for identifying possible solutions (“The attitude towards the detainees could change if the staff had shorter working hours, longer recovery

62. Ibid.

63. See e.g. BIM/HRIC, 96 et seq. More generally, the 10 buildings blocks can be seen to form part of the process along the systemic loop.

64. Königswieser/Hillebrand, 48.

breaks and received adequate payment, felt more appreciated for the challenging work”).

Hypothesis-building is a creative process which allows new perspectives and options of action to come into light and which requires flexibility and openness of mind.

### 3.3. Systemic questions – a basic working tool

“Systemic questions”<sup>65</sup> constitute a core tool of systemic practice and can enrich NPM communication practice. It is a very specific way of asking questions which help to:

- Discover hidden information
- Understand underlying perceptions and attitudes
- Identify meaningful differentiations to work with
- Take the positions of others
- See things in a new light
- Clarify basic assumptions.

Importantly, systemic questions not only generate relevant new information but also constitute an intervention as it forces interlocutors to look at issues/aspects not yet reflected upon. This effect is well documented.<sup>66</sup>

Examples<sup>67</sup> of systemic questions that could be used in a monitoring setting are:

- Circular questions: To management: “If you were in the position of staff, how would you see this situation”. To staff: If you were in the position of the prison manager, what would you change about the current prison policy? What do you think prisoners expect from staff?
- “Miracle” questions: “If this problem (of work overload, etc.) magically disappeared, how would your situation look like then and how would you notice the change?” Describe the situation then. (See principle 1)

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65. Schlippe/Schweitzer, 47 et seq.

66. Ibid.

67. For further examples, see ETH Zürich, ‘Systemic Questions to Guide Learning Processes of Students’ (15 May 2017) <[https://www.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/main/eth-zurich/education/lehrentwicklung/files\\_EN/Liste\\_SystemischeFragenCoachingLETen.pdf](https://www.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/main/eth-zurich/education/lehrentwicklung/files_EN/Liste_SystemischeFragenCoachingLETen.pdf)>; Stefan Hölscher, ‘Systemic Questions’ (Mertrion Management Consulting GbR 2006).

- Scaling questions: On the scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your current working conditions? You rated your current motivation as at 5. What would have to happen to make it a 6 or 7? What would it need to get you to a 9 or 10?
- Hypothetical question: If you could change one thing about your typical day in prison, what would it be?
- Paradoxical question: What could you do in order to worsen the situation? (This type of question allows for understanding one's own contribution to a problem)
- Solution-focused question: In which situations do you feel comfortable and safe? How do these situations differ from unsafe or violent ones? What would you need to experience more peaceful encounters?

### **3.4. Appreciative Inquiry – a tool for unearthing resources and potentials**

A particularly helpful tool is known as “Appreciative Inquiry” (AI).<sup>68</sup> It is related to principle 8: “Looking at resources and strengths, not only deficits”. As the name implies, appreciative inquiry focuses on and unearths existing strengths, resources and potentials: on what already works well, based on the assumption that every organization/institution has something that works well. Appreciative inquiry can be used as a framework for a broader organizational change process.<sup>69</sup> It can also be used as a very specific form of interviewing, its methodological heart, which is the focus here. The effects of this approach are at least two-fold:

- It sheds light on aspects of reality which exist, but are normally not seen in the deficit-oriented culture, which is still the default mode in most societies.
- The focus on positive aspects of reality helps raise motivation and enhances energy.

The Cambridge criminologist Alison Liebling was the first to adapt this innovative method to a prison setting,<sup>70</sup> other prisoner researchers

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68. David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2005) [hereinafter: Cooperrider/Whitney].

69. *Ibid.*, 15 et seq.

70. Alison Liebling, David Price and Charles Elliot, ‘Appreciative Inquiry and Relationships in Prison, Punishment and Society’ (1999) 1(1) *The International Journal of Penology*, 71–98 [hereinafter: Liebling/Price/Elliot].

followed,<sup>71</sup> and it has also been used in a police context.<sup>72</sup> In Liebling's research on the quality of life in prisons,<sup>73</sup> AI interviews were used to identify "what matters" to staff as well as to prisoners, explore the positive resources, experiences and imaginations of staff and prisoners and the possible effect these positive experiences can have on the quality of life in prisons. Furthermore, they enable a "healthy process of self-reflection" among staff and prisoners with a view to transforming situations, processes and organizational structures.

Examples of AI questions used are:

- In here, what gives you life and energy?
- Reflecting on other prisons you know, where/when do you think relations between staff and prisoners have been at their best?
- If you were in charge of training prison staff, what would you most emphasize about how they should relate to inmates?
- What is the best that happened to you during your time in this prison?
- What is the ideal for staff prisoner relationships?

Liebling and her team conclude "that the method of appreciative inquiry has a distinct power and relevance in prison setting. There is something distinctly energizing about the exploration of the best expectations of people and organizations."<sup>74</sup>

Members of NPMs participating in a series of online meetings within the framework of the current project in May and June 2020, where Liebling presented her research and this method, expressed great interest in using it in their work, but also highlighted the need to, firstly, adapt it to the characteristics of NPM work, in particular its time restraints, and, secondly, to have specific training on how to concretely use it in their practice.

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71. Andrew Jefferson and Liv Gaborit, *Human Rights in Prisons. Comparing Institutional Encounters in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and the Philippines* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015).

72. Walter Suntinger and Moritz Birk, 'Appreciative Inquiry: Mobilising Potentials within Police Organizations to Realize Human Rights', in: Ralf Alleweldt (ed.), *Fair Treatment of Persons in Police Custody* (Springer Verlag 2021) [hereinafter: Suntinger/Birk].

73. See more in Prisons Research Center (University of Cambridge), 'MQPL+: Analyses of Quality, Culture, and Values in Individual Prisons' (11 February 2016) <<https://www.prc.crim.cam.ac.uk/directory/research-themes/mqpl>> [hereinafter: Prison Research Center].

74. Liebling/Price/Elliot, 93.

### 3.5. “Peer consulting” – a tool for reflection

As mentioned above, a systemic approach means being well aware of the limits of one’s own perspective as just one personal view of the circumstances rather than the ‘objective truth’. Consequently, such approach emphasizes the importance of questioning one’s own perspective, recognizing its limits (through critical self–reflection, see principle 10) and actively inviting other perspectives to increase the impact of the interventions.

While this is already done in monitoring by interviewing many different stakeholders inside and outside of places of detention, the tool ‘peer consulting’ offers a possibility to effectively use the perspectives of colleagues to better identify problems and develop solutions.<sup>75</sup> We believe it could be of great help to any NPM or monitoring team.

The main idea behind the method is that a system is marked by the way stories are ‘narrated’: Reality can be described in many different ways and no perspective is, per se, right or wrong. “[I]t is precisely the diversity of viewpoints that allows complex events to be perceived appropriately”.<sup>76</sup> And this diversity also allows for innovative solutions to emerge.

“Peer consulting” can be applied by following three steps:<sup>77</sup>

- A monitor describes the situation and problem experienced without interference by the peers. They can only ask clarifying questions in order to get a better understanding but do not yet analyse the problem.
- Afterwards the peers discuss the case of the monitor among themselves while the monitor only observes without participating (ideally even by turning the back to the others). They exchange how they perceived her/him, sharing their own thoughts and feelings and forming hypothesis why the problem exists, what the reasons and root causes may be. They carefully stay away from judgments but simply offer their perspectives.
- Finally, the monitor enters the discussion again and shares how the discussion was perceived, which new perspectives and useful insights were gained and reflects together with the peers on which next steps could be taken.

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75. This is a simplified version of a tool, developed in systemic therapy and commonly called in systemic consulting, “Reflecting Team”, see Schlippe/Schweitzer, 97-107.

76. Ibid., 98.

77. This was successfully tested out in the expert meeting “Treatment of Certain Groups of Prisoners in a Situation of Vulnerability” (18-19 November 2019) which was held in Bulgaria in the course of the mentioned NPM-project.

The key of this method is to allow different perspectives of a problem to emerge without intervening, defending one's own perspective or judging other viewpoints. It can be immensely helpful to just listen to the colleagues talk and form hypothesis about one's own problem. This regularly leads to new insights and perspectives regarding a better understanding of the problem as well as the identification of possible solutions.







# A Dossier for National Preventive Mechanisms

