

THEORIES OF OFFENDER REHABILITATION AND THEIR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION: RELEVANCE FOR THE KINGDOM OF TONGA

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I. INTRODUCTION

Offender rehabilitation plays a vital role in the criminal justice system by aiming to reduce reoffending and promote public safety globally. To achieve this, rehabilitation programmes must be grounded in evidence-based theories that have been tested and proven effective across diverse global, regional and local contexts. Among these, the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model stands out for its strong empirical foundation and widespread application, including in the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (SPPS), where it informs risk assessment and tailored intervention planning (Sutton, Persson & Danielsson, 2003). The use of the Good Lives Model (GLM) also offers a more culturally congruent framework such as for the Māori offenders in New Zealand as highlighted by Leaming & Wills (2016, pp. 59 – 69). This JICA training programme offered the opportunity to focus on the RNR model as a core framework for offender rehabilitation. This model holds significant potential for Tonga, where probation services currently operate without a formal legislative framework and rely heavily on officer discretion and within legal jurisdictions.

As the well-known saying goes, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In Tonga, this sentiment is reflected in the proverb, ‘oku ‘i ha kolo ke tokoni ki hono tokoni’i ha fakaliliu ha tokotaha.¹ This perspective aligns with the Tongan *faa’i kavei koula*,² which have long shaped Tongan upbringing (Koloto, 2021, pp. 39–51). These four core values are known as *faka’apa’apa*, *loto tō*, *mamahi’i me’a* and *tauhi vā*,³ which are central not only to early education but also provide a strong moral and social foundation for offender rehabilitation. Within this worldview, rehabilitation is not solely the responsibility of the government or probation officers, but it also involves the *kainga*,⁴ *siasi*⁵ and the broader *kolo*.⁶ For rehabilitation to be truly effective in Tonga, it must be deeply rooted in these cultural pillars and further reinforced by Christian faith, which remains a significant influence in everyday life (Kavafolau, 2021). The RNR model complements this approach by offering a structured yet flexible framework that can be culturally adapted to Tonga’s context. By aligning risk assessment and intervention planning with Tongan values and social realities, it supports more consistent, targeted and meaningful rehabilitation practices.

This paper examines the current state of offender rehabilitation in Tonga, highlighting its strengths and challenges, and explores how adopting and adapting international models, particularly the RNR model, which can improve local outcomes. It also outlines how participation in the JICA training programme will enhance the capacity of Tonga’s probation officers to lead more effective and culturally relevant rehabilitation strategies.

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¹ “It takes a village to support the rehabilitation of a person.”

² Four Golden Values

³ Respect, humility, loyalty and commitment, maintaining and nurturing relationship

⁴ Extended family

⁵ Churches

⁶ Community

II. CURRENT SITUATION OF OFFENDER REHABILITATION IN TONGA

In Tonga, the rehabilitation of offenders is carried out primarily by the Probation Department under the Ministry of Justice. Although there is currently no dedicated Probation Act to formally guide probation work, rehabilitation practices are permitted and directed through court orders (Section 25A of the Criminal Offences Act, Tonga) “where person is convicted of an offence punishable by imprisonment the Court may make a community service order requiring him/her to perform unpaid work for the benefit of the community”. The purposes of the Tonga Youth Justice Bill 2024 are to (a) prevent a child or young person alleged to have committed an offence from entering the formal criminal justice system and the adverse consequences which follow; (b) provide an age, developmental and culturally appropriate response to youth offending; (c) reduce pressure on the court system by diverting minor cases from the courts and reduce the likelihood of a child or young person reoffending by addressing the issues that have led to offending behaviour, through the development of an appropriate and monitored Youth Diversion Plan and legal advice from the Attorney General’s Office. In the absence of a specific legislative framework, probation officers rely heavily on their professional judgment, experience and informal practices when delivering services.

The Probation Department performs a wide range of duties. These include:

- Preparing pre-sentencing reports for the courts,
- Supervising community work orders and probation conditions,
- Conducting home visits and follow-ups with the probationer,
- Providing counselling and support to both adult and juvenile offenders,
- Collaborating with stakeholders such as families, churches, school and NGOs to support reintegration efforts.

Probation officers in Tonga carry out risk assessments informally by interviewing offenders, gathering background information and consulting with community members to understand an offender’s personal history and current circumstances. While these assessments are often based on local knowledge and experience rather than standardized tools, officers use them to evaluate whether the offender is remorseful, engaged in community life and ready to reintegrate. In some cases, officers may recommend specific training, spiritual counselling or rehabilitation programmes to the court. The work of probation officers, however, is becoming increasingly challenging. One major issue is the lack of a formal risk assessment framework, which limits the ability to identify criminogenic needs and match interventions accordingly. The rise in drug-related offences, coupled with a small and overstretched team, further increases the risk of burnout and weakens the department’s capacity to monitor probationers effectively. Officers also face safety risks during home visits, especially in volatile or high-risk environments, due to the absence of security support.

Despite these limitations, the strength of the Tongan probation system lies in the dedication of its staff whose vision to live in the family, in a village, in a country, in a Government that all Tongans feel secure, comfort and free also by promoting public safety by making a positive difference in the lives of offenders, families, victims and the community illustrates in their mission to provide access to evidence-based early intervention, supervision, treatment and secure care for offenders so they learn accountability and responsibility, families are strengthened and community safety is enhanced. And the values are to responsibility, fairness, respect caring, trustworthiness and citizenship. These are combined with a strong community-based approach that draws on close family ties and local support networks. These are supported by *kainga*, such as town officers, and *siasi*, such as informal rehabilitation programmes and spiritual counselling by pastors. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Salvation Army and the Woman and Children Crisis Centre (WCCC), reflect Tonga’s communal values and are recommend by probation to the court depending on the context of the offender’s criminal record and chances for rehabilitation. This cultural foundation offers an opportunity to build more structured and effective rehabilitation strategies, especially if combined with evidence-based models such as the RNR and GLM, adapted appropriately to the Tongan context.

III. CHALLENGES HINDERING REHABILITATION PROGRAMME DELIVERY

The delivery and impact of offender rehabilitation services in Tonga face several significant challenges. A key issue is the absence of a formal legal framework, such as a dedicated Probation Act, to clearly define the roles, responsibilities and authority of probation officers. At present, probation work is guided by court orders, the Juvenile Act and occasional legal advice from the Attorney General's office. This legal ambiguity limits the consistency and authority needed to implement structured rehabilitation programmes. A small team of probation officers is responsible for an increasing number of offenders, which can compromise the quality of supervision and follow-up. Officers also operate with limited logistical and security support, placing them at personal risk, especially during home visits.

Another critical gap is the lack of standardized risk assessment tools. Unlike jurisdictions that use evidence-based frameworks like the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, Tonga relies on informal interviews and officer discretion, which can lead to inconsistent evaluations and less targeted interventions. These systemic issues are compounded by rising social problems, especially drug-related offences among youth, which increase recidivism risks. Moreover, while Tonga's communal and faith-based culture can support reintegration, it may also contribute to stigma and exclusion of offenders by their families or communities. Addressing these challenges requires rehabilitation programmes that are not only evidence-based but also culturally grounded to ensure their effectiveness and social acceptance within the Tongan context.

IV. SUPPORTING OFFENDER REHABILITATION IN TONGA

Despite facing structural and resource limitations, Tonga possesses several cultural and institutional strengths that offer a solid foundation for effective offender rehabilitation. Central to this foundation is the *siasi*, a powerful institution that shapes community values and individual behaviour. Churches often function as informal yet impactful rehabilitation spaces, offering spiritual guidance, emotional support, and opportunities for reflection and service. Equally vital is the *kainga*, which remains the core support system in Tongan society. Families not only provide emotional encouragement but also offer practical assistance such as housing, employment opportunities and social reintegration. These efforts are grounded in cultural values like *mamahi'i me'a* and *tauhi vā*, kinship responsibility, resonating with evidence-based rehabilitation principles.

The Tongan *faa'i kavei koula* form a solid cultural foundation that is closely aligned with the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model's emphasis on individualized, respectful and relational approaches to offender rehabilitation. These norms naturally complement structured offender management approaches, such as the RNR model, by incorporating relational accountability into the rehabilitation process. Furthermore, in the absence of formal tools and legal frameworks, probation officers demonstrate strong commitment by providing individualized, culturally sensitive support. Their ability to engage sensitively with clients and build trust exemplifies the RNR model's responsivity principle, which emphasizes the importance of tailoring interventions to individual characteristics. Together, these strengths, community and church engagement, culturally rooted values and dedicated frontline officers form a strong foundation for Tonga to develop more formal, evidence-based rehabilitation practices that are grounded in local realities.

V. STRATEGIC PATHWAYS FOR REFORM AND IMPROVEMENT

Improving offender rehabilitation in Tonga requires a comprehensive and culturally grounded strategy that addresses existing challenges while building on the country's enduring social strengths. Central to this approach is the careful integration of internationally recognized frameworks particularly the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model and the Good Lives Model (GLM) adapted to resonate with Tonga's deeply held cultural values such as *faa'i kavei koula*. Embedding these principles in rehabilitation programming enhances community relevance, fosters offender engagement and promotes sustainable positive outcomes.

Equally important is the development of culturally appropriate assessment tools that move beyond informal interviews and officer discretion. These tools should incorporate Tongan communication styles, social values and the significance of extended family networks. A mixed-methods design, combining quantitative data with narrative and relational insights, will allow for more personalized and accurate rehabilitation plans. Simultaneously, building the capacity of probation officers through ongoing training is critical. This training should encompass the practical use of models like RNR and GLM, alongside cultural competence, trauma-informed care, ethical practice and personal safety, especially during community-based work. These investments will enhance service quality, support staff well-being and strengthen public trust in the system. In Tonga, reintegration is a deeply social process shaped by communal values such as the Tongan four golden pillars. Offending is often seen as bringing shame not only to the individual but also to their family and village, which can result in rejection and social exclusion. Trusted institutions like the church, extended family and community organizations are essential in bridging this gap. Through restorative practices, spiritual guidance and collective responsibility, these partnerships reduce stigma, rebuild trust and create a supportive environment where rehabilitation and reintegration are genuinely possible and culturally meaningful.

To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of these reforms, this means regularly looking at things like how many people stay out of trouble, how well they fit back into their communities and how satisfied they feel with the support they get. It's also important to involve many groups, such as government, NGOs and community leaders, so they can help provide resources, policies and services that offenders need. At the same time, we need to be aware of challenges like limited funding or resistance to change, and find ways to address these so the reforms can be successfully put into practice and make a real difference. Participation in the JICA training programme offers a unique and timely opportunity to support these goals. As potentially the first female probation officer from Tonga to attend, I recognize the importance of gender diversity in this field. The programme equipped me with the knowledge and skills to lead reforms that are culturally sensitive and inclusive, helping to build a more effective, equitable and sustainable probation service for Tonga.

VI. CONCLUSION

Tonga's probation system plays a vital role in supporting offender rehabilitation and community safety, yet it faces substantial structural and operational challenges. The absence of a formal legislative framework, limited resources and the lack of standardized assessment tools constrain the system's effectiveness. Despite these barriers, Tonga holds powerful cultural strengths such as the influence of the church, the support of extended families and the guiding values of respect and maintaining relationships that offer meaningful foundations for reform. By adapting evidence-based models such as the RNR model to align with Tonga's cultural context, the probation system can offer more consistent, responsive and inclusive support to offenders. This includes the development of culturally appropriate assessment tools, enhanced training for probation officers, and stronger collaboration with families, churches and community organizations. Gaining knowledge and skills through the JICA training programme will be instrumental in supporting these reforms. The training not only strengthened our technical understanding of rehabilitation models but also equipped the Probation Division with international perspectives and practical strategies to lead change. By bridging global best practices with local values, we can create a more just, inclusive and sustainable rehabilitation system that benefits both individuals and communities.

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