International Cooperation in Social Work: Some Reflections on a Swiss-Russian Cooperation Project

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1 Introduction

One key objective of higher education policy, particularly its drive towards modernisation, is the internationalisation of research and teaching (see Schnurr 2005: 143). A university's internationalisation strategy concerns various areas, such as staff and student mobility, research and teaching partnerships, and development cooperations (see Truniger/Wilhelm 2009; see also Schauder/Schilling 2009). This reflection report provides insights into an example of an international development cooperation lasting several years, namely, between the FHNW School of Social Work (HSA FHNW) and the Federal State University "Vologda Institute for Law and Economics of the Federal Penal System" (VIPE). Cooperation focused on the professionalisation of social work in the Russian penal system. Such international and intercultural development cooperation presented the involved universities and their project members with various challenges. Notwithstanding various difficulties, the project was brought to successful completion and the desired outcome—a Methods Handbook for Social Workers in the Russian Penal System—will soon be published. This report discusses both the challenges involved and the factors contributing to successful development cooperation.

2 International Research And Development Cooperation

Whereas the demand for cooperation is part of "the political and pedagogic programme of the present" (Hamburger 2004: 187), the international orientation of (European) social work can look back on a long tradition (see, for instance, Schnurr 2009, 2005; Hering 2004). A dense network of international relations existed within social welfare already at the beginning of the twentieth century. It promoted mutual learning among welfare professionals and beyond national borders, and meant that professionals competed with one another in implementing progressive objectives (see Hering 2004: 123-125). According to historical records, a first congress on the social question was held in Brussels in 1856, but it was not until the 1889 World Fair in Paris that the idea for convening such conferences on a regular basis arose (see ibid.). Following an interruption caused by the First World War, the idea of regular international meetings was taken up again in Europe in 1923, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the "National Conference of Social Work." The outbreak of the Second World War once again interrupted the tradition of regular meetings and after 1945 it was no longer possible to resume a "pan-European" exchange of ideas and experience. Hering observes that "in the West, postwar reconstruction was strongly influenced by Anglo-American methodology. In the East, the Soviet-influenced, altered notion of the welfare state and of social work affected the respective national traditions of social welfare in completely different

ways and the exchange of ideas was concentrated on contact with the corresponding Soviet organisations" (ibid.: 124). Hering further notes that the studies undertaken in Eastern European countries on the newly emerging forms of social work are hardly related to their own history, but in the first instance regard the establishment of a social welfare system after forty years of socialist social policy as "the shaping of new territory." Initially, these countries rediscovered their own traditions before 1940 only through ethnological and biographical research. Russian welfare historians are meanwhile documenting the early history of charitable welfare, which reaches back to Peter the Great, as well as formulating other research desiderata, such as the need to study the "Stalinist turn" in the country's welfare structure (see ibid: 128). Other sources assume a "100-year-old history" of welfare in Russia (see Firsov 2011). At the same time—and the cooperative project presented here makes this clear—the idea of a universal conception of social work has become increasingly influential with the rise and spread of globalisation. Such a conception is meant to provide answers to universal problems. Commenting on the debate about "International Social Work," Schnurr (2009: 24) thus also observes "[…] strong tendencies to emphasise the identity and coherence of social work—beyond national, regional, and cultural influences." Following Treptow (2001: 102), however, an international orientation is not "an end unto itself to overcome a culturally-specific and constrained social pedagogy." Nevertheless, as Treptow further asserts, the manifestation of specificity and difference "depend on those problems that social policy construes as pressing and on the specific interests of social pedagogy theory, research, and practice" (ibid.). Thus, it is hardly surprising that when actors from the field of social work transcend their "home pastures," "irritating observations" soon became evident (Schnurr 2009: 25). "The forms of institutionalising social work, the patterns of embedding social work within welfare-, educational-, legal-, and political systems shaped by national characteristics, as well as social work as a professional order, have not only commonalities and similarities but especially considerable differences" (ibid.). All of sudden, it is no longer the similarities but the differences which move centre stage — and thus also problems of comparison. This is by no means trivial, since comparison is embedded within a cultural and "institutional-disciplinary context" (see also Matthes 1992; Homfeldt/Walser 2003; Schnurr 2005). Lorenz concurs with other scholars that comparisons between countries not only run into linguistic and terminological difficulties — which should not be underestimated — but moreover that difficulties arise in connection with the complexity of the factors determining "the nature of social work and which can never be reduced to a single level of indicators" (Lorenz 2004: 40f.). However, "a fourfold set of criteria" and, as Lorenz also maintains, the analysis of their interactions could contribute to better understanding this complexity and to "indicating the different dynamics within which professional identities and task areas emerge" (ibid.: 41). These key categories concern the differences between (1) models of the welfare state, (2) the lifeworld, (3) institutional practice, and (4) professional standards. According to Lorenz, these categories are dynamically interrelated; their interaction "reveals particular patterns for each country and each political culture, which in turn affect social work and its practice" (ibid.: 45). Finally, within the context of international development cooperation, the danger of colonialist tendencies or ethnocentrism also need to be problematised (see Gautschi/Rüegger 2009). In this respect, Payne and Askeland (2008: 5) refer to the four force fields, described by Gray and Fook (2004), between "globalizing and localization – the tendency for globalizing and localizing tendencies to occur together; Westernization and indigenization – the balance between Western and alternative conceptions of practice; multiculturalism and universalization – the implication and response to inbuilt cultural biases; universal-local standards – the incorporation of both universal and localized conceptualizations of social work within our thinking."

Notwithstanding the above qualification, international research and development projects provide researchers with the opportunity to extend to other contexts their theoretical and empirical knowledge of social work action fields, practices, and methods, even if transferability appears to be limited on account of different contextual conditions (see also Schnurr 2009). The opportunities, advantages, and possibilities of transnational cooperation can be subject to critical reflection, just as much as the dangers, burdens, and unintended side-effects (similarly, see Hamburger 2004). Last but not least, such cooperative ventures are also cooperative relations, that is, social interactions between those involved. Hamburger addresses this issue as follows: "Based on our therapeutic and social science knowledge, we know that suppressed and unvoiced conflicts are one key obstacle in morally charged cooperative relations. Cooperation based on reflective planning is limited, sets boundaries, and allows for conflict" (Hamburger 2004: 188). This section has introduced various challenges existing on the factual and interpersonal levels of international cooperation. These are discussed below in relation to our specific project experiences. To facilitate understanding, we first provide a brief description of our Swiss-Russian cooperation project.

3 "Towards Social Integration" – A Swiss Russian Coope-Ration Project

Social work in Russia is only now being established as a science, practice, and field of teaching. The Federal State University "Vologda Institute for Law and Economics of the Federal Penal System" (VIPE) is driving forward the professionalisation of social work in Russia's penal system through its research, development ventures, and training programmes for social workers (see Wilhelm et al. 2009; Gautschi/Rüegger 2009). Social work in the Swiss and Russian penal systems is aimed at recidivism reduction and at improving the reintegration potential of former inmates. Now spanning four years, our development cooperation has compared and discussed the processes, practices, methods, and instruments of social work in the Swiss and Russian penal and probation systems in terms of "good practice." One declared end product of the project was the development of a process-oriented Methods Handbook for Social Work in the Penal System of the Russian Federation, written for students and practitioners. On the technical, subject-specific level of cooperation, this objective called for a continuous debate on the different views and perspectives on the function and subject matter of social work, its bodies of theoretical knowledge, its value reference, and its professional action in general. On this basis, the project partners undertook a methodologically stringent and systematic survey, collection, documentation, and discussion of the various bodies of knowledge specific to the two penal systems under investigation. Project phase 1 (2008–2009) was devoted to elaborating a detailed concept for the envisaged process-oriented methods handbook[1]. Following an introduction to the general terms and concepts of social work, the handbook discusses various topics, including diagnostic procedures, intervention methods, evaluation and self-reflection, publications, and professional skills development for social workers in the penal system. Phase 2 (2009–2011) focused on developing the eight chapters of the handbook along the established conceptual lines; each chapter presented the Russian and Swiss perspectives on the basis of theory and empirical evidence. In addition to video conference sessions, a regular exchange of ideas on chapter contents, in particular on the discrepancies and parallels between the Russian and Swiss perspectives, took place at the semi-annual, one-week symposia held regularly in the

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[1] Besides research assistants and lecturers from the FHNW School of Social Work, Swiss project members included social workers employed in the penal and probation systems as well as HSA FHNW BA and MA students. Russian project members included university lecturers and research assistants, and there was intensive contact with social workers employed in the penal system.

two countries. In a next phase, the methods handbook will be implemented in our Russian partner's teaching and, through further training programmes, in actual practice. More or less as a by-product, our development cooperation resulted in a regular exchange of ideas and experience about the various methodological and didactic approaches to social work education. The HSA FHNW-VIPE project became the subject of various Bachelor's theses and of student papers written on the MA module "International Social Work and Social Policy."

3.1 The Intersection of Scientific and Practice-Related Bodies of Knowledge[2]

The basic idea of this transnational cooperation was for the project partners to jointly tackle the professional development of social work in the Russian prison system and to develop a methods handbook[3]. The project team thus first faced the challenge of elaborating guidelines for a context of action unfamiliar to the Swiss project team in cultural and practical terms. A literature review and initial research indicated that to date only very few Russian and Swiss publications have explored the issue of reintegration-after-imprisonment (see, for instance, Shestakov 2006; Bothge 2004; Mayer/Schildknecht 2009; Sommerfeld/ Hollenstein/Calzaferri 2011). In view of the scant literature on social work action in the penal system, that is, how social work might contribute to successfully designing reintegration processes, HSA FNHW-VIPE project work focused on the general methodological foundations of social work along with the specific knowledge of social work in the penal system. The involvement of social work practitioners from the penal and probation systems—first through their participation in symposia and institutional visits in Switzerland and Russia and secondly through qualitative expert interviews on various topics of the future handbook—helped start closing the gaps in the literature with subjective and unsystematised practical experience. Particularly the symposia discussions on the respective handbook chapters offered the participating practitioners the opportunity to appraise and comment on the formulated scientific knowledge posited by the university-based researchers from the perspective of their experience-based, day-to-day knowledge. Thus, collaboration between theory and practice entailed the intersection of various bodies of knowledge: on the one hand, different (Swiss and Russian) bodies of scientific knowledge and positions; on the other, experience- and context-related practical knowledge and scientific knowledge. Even if the country-specific perspectives now appear separately in the handbook, at least within the project team different bodies of knowledge and positions came into contact and were contrasted, interconnected, and sometimes probably also reciprocally "labelled." The intersection of different bodies of knowledge automatically presents the challenge of comparison and comparing.

3.2 The Challenges of Comparison

Against the background of the above-described discourse on international research and development cooperation, it becomes evident that notwithstanding a common research subject, "Social Work in the Penal System," one should expect not only similarities but also differences between the shape which social work takes in different places. Our bi-national project thus faced the challenge of comparison (see also Wilhelm et al. 2009: 39). Although

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[2] Important ideas for the reflections presented in this section arose in discussions with Stefan Schnurr, to whom we are grateful for his critical questions and valuable suggestions.

[3] The universities are responsible for transferring the project results to their teaching and to local fields of practice (see Wilhelm 2009: 79), whereby mutual assistance in undertaking such dissemination is also possible.

our handbook focuses on social work methods, a comparative perspective on taking methodical social work action in the Swiss and Russian penal systems should not be limited to the level of social work methods. Lorenz (2004), as noted, emphasises that such a comparison should include all the dimensions co-determining local social work practices. In retrospect and in terms of the dimensions identified by Lorenz (2004), our discussion focused primarily on the respective local professional standards and on their interaction with institutional practice. The manifold interrelations between these two dimensions on the one hand, and the social welfare and penal system models in Russia and Switzerland and the lifeworld of prisoners on the other, were not as such disregarded, but neither were they subject to any systematic survey. One contribution to clarifying the specific national criminal justice dimensions was made, for instance, by symposia talks focusing on the current statutory developments in the respective law enforcement system. Besides offering insights into institutional practice, institutional visits in Switzerland and Russia contributed to raising awareness of the lifeworld of prisoners.

Since the temporal and financial resources at our disposal made it impossible to consider all the dimensions needed for a full-scale comparison, the project partners dispensed with a joint comparative contribution to the methods handbook. In our view, such a procedure would have had the great potential of leading to false conclusions, since supposed commonalities and differences between professional standards or between institutional practice would not have been considered as regards their interplay with the particular welfare state model and the specific lifeworld contexts. Already taken at the outset of the project, the decision to dispense with co-authored texts and instead to set Swiss and Russian contributions side by side proved correct; contributions were developed along a previously agreed content structure and written from the perspectives of local social work practices. Whereas this approach means that possible insights (see Schnurr 2009: 27-29) arising from comparison are lost, it seems far more feasible to describe local practices and to interpret these practices within their specific context than to draw rash conclusions about the commonalities and differences between local practices. Consequently, the handbook affords readers the opportunity to familiarise themselves with local social work practices and methods in the Russian and Swiss penal systems. How and whether these descriptions are assessed or received, as well as transferred to other contexts, is for readers to decide.

3.3 Dealing with Heterogeneity in Designing Social Work

In preparing the methods handbook, every care was taken not to convey the image of social work as a homogeneous field existing only within national borders or in the "West." Whereas certain similarities exist between social work in Western contexts (see Gray/Fook 2004: 633), we agree with Doel und Penn (2007: 377) that there is no unified "Western" social work as such, nor does it exist as a homogeneous field within the national borders of Russia or Switzerland. Whereas, for instance, a strong shift from reintegration-focused to recidivism-risk-oriented social work can be observed in large parts of Switzerland (see, for instance, Mayer/Schlatter/Zobrist 2007), this development has also been subject to critical evaluation (see Sommerfeld/Rüegger/Gautschi 2009). The symposia variously established that different positions have developed also in Russia—or at least at our partner university VIPE—about the methodological design of social work in the penal system. Consequently, our handbook attempts to take into account various scientific and professional positions, in order to make the existing heterogeneity evident to readers and to encourage them to adopt their own position on the basis of substantiated professional reasoning.

3.4   Finding a Common Language and Learning through Cultural Differences

The Swiss and Russian project partners communicated with each other aided by interpreters and translators, which meant that they relied quite significantly on the language professionals involved. The language problems could not be underestimated at any stage of the project, since the accurate and painstaking translation of scientific texts was at stake. This issue had to be addressed time and again throughout the project.

However, the challenges of communicating across language boundaries and understanding each other should not be reduced to linguistic aspects. In particular at the outset of our cooperation, great emphasis was placed on discussing and interpreting the terms and concepts underlying the theoretical and professional notions of social work action. One major factor in this respect was the need to find both a common language and analogies for Russian and Swiss terms and concepts.

These discourses provided project participants with insights into and information about the other country. They enabled both sides to learn from cultural differences and similarities (see Gray 2005: 237). Further, they facilitated reflection on professional action which has become second nature, and which reaches well beyond lived experience and "captures the cognitive structure of an entire profession in a particular country" (Wilhelm et. al 2009: 40).

3.5   Challenges and Supporting Factors on the Processual Level

On the processual level, different working methods became apparent not only in the social work practices existing in each country's penal systems, but also between the cooperation partners. Whereas each side's perception of cultural and institutional differences was repeatedly taken into consideration, these differences remained challenging throughout the project. Differences became apparent as regards communication (for instance, whether and how cooperation problems should be addressed), the organisation of work processes and the commitments associated therewith, and scientific work. Although the project teams expected different approaches to communication and organisation, we were surprised to discover varying approaches to scientific writing. For instance, the Swiss project team often struggled to follow the structure of Russian texts, which make only scant use of structuring devices such as chapter headings. By contrast, the Russian project team found the finely woven structure of Swiss texts unclear or confusing. Here, too, the decision to write separate texts, from the Russian and Swiss perspectives respectively, helped relieve pressure on cooperation, since this meant that no consensus on which style of scientific writing should be adopted had to be reached. Specialist literature on different styles of scientific practice, written by Western and Eastern European scholars (see Breitkopf/Vassileva 2007), further helped the project partners to understand each other's different styles of scientific writing. Once more, it should be emphasised that rather than assuming a homogeneous style of scientific practice in Russia and in "the West," such practices may be said to differ also between language regions (see Siepmann 2006 for German, English, and French) and disciplines (see Hyland 2006).

Continuous clarification on a communicative level also became necessary during discussions of the handbook manuscript, particularly as regards the extent to which irritating structural devices or formulations were culture-specific and thus did not necessarily call for adjustment, or whether such matters were in need of improvement regardless of cultural factors.

Thus, the force fields described at the beginning of this report in reference to Grey and Fook (2004) also manifested themselves in developing the handbook contents, on both the

relational and processual levels. Consequently, openness, interest, curiosity, and respect for the subject-specific positions adopted by the project partners were an essential prerequisite for successful collaboration.

According to Schnur (2009: 28), it is likely that different perceptions about good practice as well as varying conceptions of knowledge and usefulness exist in international and transnational projects. Public perceptions of science also vary according to society (see Yudina 2007), a factor which may also lead to different legitimation requirements for a project towards funding bodies or public institutions. Such requirements make necessary a critical and reflexive distance to one's own standpoints and convictions (see Schnurr 2009: 28) — not only towards one's view of the subject but also towards one's notion of good scientific practice, communication, and the organisation of project cooperation. In retrospect, we would consider a regular meta-level discussion on these mostly implicit and different notions and perceptions feasible. Besides enabling the above-mentioned critical and reflexive distance, this would also facilitate mutual understanding, which in turn could positively affect both the processual level and the quality of the work undertaken. Even if the processual level matters in every project, our initial and subjective cooperation experiences in working together with our Russian colleagues suggest attaching particular importance to this level.

3.6   Supporting Conditions in the Organisational and Financial Framework

 Project success also hinges considerably on organisational and financial conditions as well as on institutional cooperations. Schnurr draws on Øyen (1990) to highlight the necessity of an "extra measure of resources." Other resources significant for international or rather transnational-comparative research include adequate funding, time, and staff (see Øyen 1990, cited in Schnurr 2009: 30-31). The fact that the project teams involved in our cooperation project did not have the same resources at their disposal complicated not only our work on the methods handbook but also collaboration on the processual level. Moreover, the Russian team experienced far greater staff fluctuation, on both the university management and project team levels. However, a key supporting factor on the side of the Russian project team was that the need for professionalising social work in the penal system is largely recognised, not only at the team's institute (VIPE) but also in professional practice and among professional bodies and authorities in Russia. Consequently, new and innovative ideas and methodological approaches to correctional practice and to the training of social workers are not only welcome but also promoted and transferred to field institutions. Further, the project was firmly anchored within the partner universities and defined as legally binding by a cooperation agreement signed at the university management level. This formal agreement proved especially valuable for securing project funding. Although funding was received from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF DORE), the Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences (KFH), and the HSA FHNW promotion fund, the project was funded partly by the partner universities themselves. The latter financial resources were an important source of support. Last but not least, further project support came from the close cooperation with the Swiss Embassy in Moscow, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC / DEZA), the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), and the Federal Service for the Execution of Penal Sentences (FSIN) in Moscow[4]. Contacts between

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these agencies and Russian government ministries and institutions in Vologda and Moscow, as well as their helpful assistance in organising the project symposia, also contributed to successful project execution.

4 Conclusion

The HSA FHNW-VIPE cooperation project focused on the transnational transfer of knowledge and concepts and on "good practice transfer" between two universities and experts from various areas of social work. As seen, challenges to successful cooperation, and conditions supporting success, could be identified on the content-, processual-, and organisational levels.

Defining a concrete project objective on the content level, namely, the joint development of a methods handbook, served to guide and support cooperation. The actual writing of the handbook both required and enabled concrete and continuous communication about the heterogeneous theoretical concepts and local practices of social work in the Swiss and Russian penal systems. For communication to succeed in such projects, it must be based on high-quality written translation and interpreting. Bringing the handbook to successful completion was facilitated by the decision not to incorporate the country-specific perspectives in a joint (comparative) text but instead to present these perspectives in parallel and along the lines of an agreed content structure. The semi-annual symposia, held in Switzerland and Russia, provided a binding and well-structured framework for joint discussions of the written descriptions and partly also of the country-specific interpretations of social work in the penal system. The symposia also provided an opportunity for initial comparisons between the specific national contexts of social work, which reached beyond the confines of the handbook.

Further, the symposia proved successful on the processual level. Nevertheless, the different working methods remained challenging until the end of the project and made necessary continuous dialogue. In our view, precisely such challenging situations as those arising from transnational cooperation call for respecting and remaining curious about other positions and for adopting a critical and reflexive distance to one's own views. With the benefit of hindsight, we would create more opportunities for clarifying the different working methods and structural conditions framing the project. Whereas the continuous exchange of ideas inbetween the symposia, both in writing and over the telephone, proved necessary, such communication did not alone suffice to clarify questions on the content-, processual-, and organisational levels. Precisely in conflict situations, seeking face-to-face talks is a necessary means of resolving difficulties and may thus call for meetings outside the regular symposia.

On the organisational level, a successful cooperation process requires sufficient financial-, temporal-, and staff resources, in order to ensure that project members can devote themselves to their content-related tasks and to successfully designing the cooperation process. Finally, the assistance with cooperation organisation provided by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC / DEZA), the Swiss Embassy in Moscow, and the Federal Service for the Execution of Penal Sentences (FSIN) in Moscow proved very helpful.

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