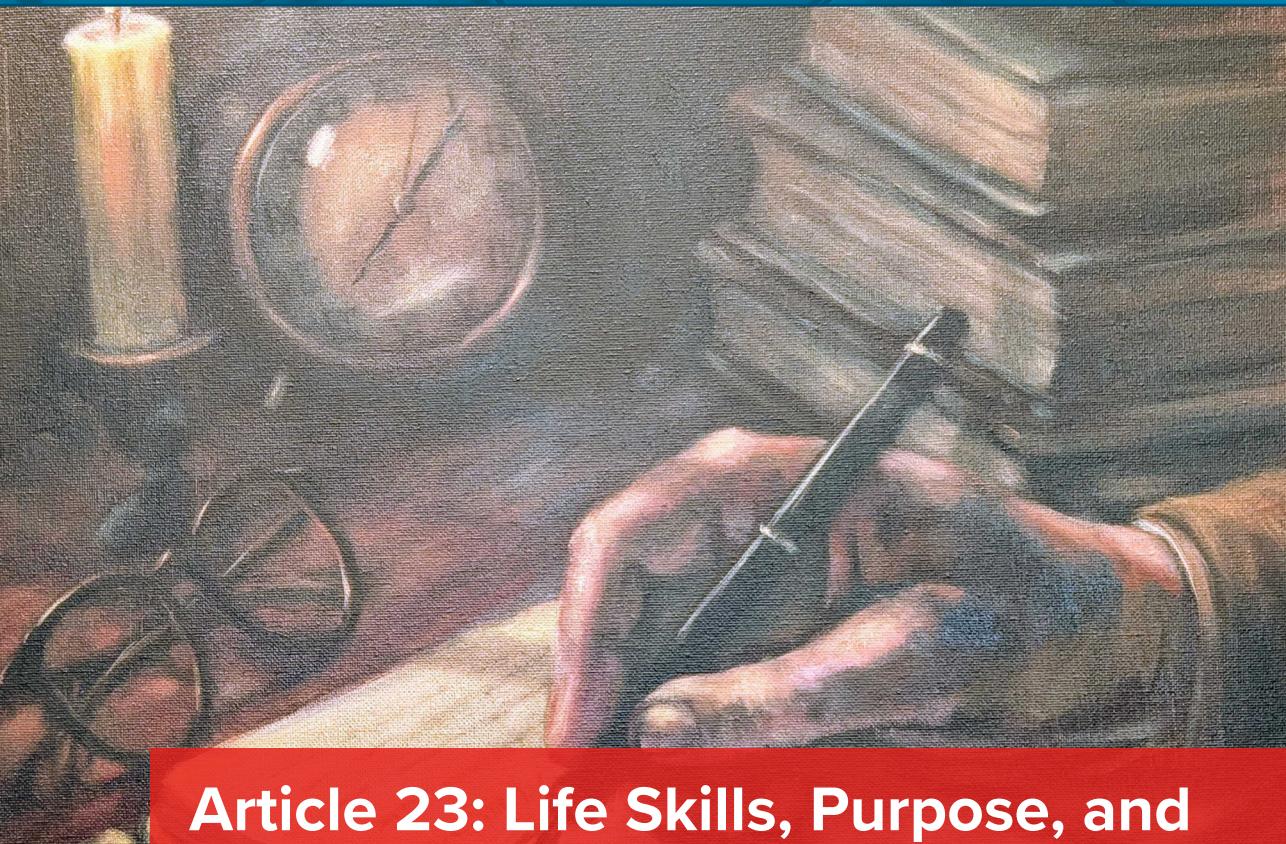


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LIFE SKILLS, PURPOSE, AND HOPE: MAKING RE-ENTRY SUCCESSFUL

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Abstract

The Uganda Prisons Service oversee 269 prisons within the country. The prisons, although housed in a Low-Income-Country, are structured to provide opportunities for prisoners to grow, learn skills, and prepare to re-enter society as law abiding contributing members of their communities. In the current article, we speak to how the service accomplishes their objective, highlighting their low recidivism rate of 13.4% in 2025, the diverse programs offered, and how these programs are enacted. We then explain how it is possible to do more with less resources and tight budgets, highlighting how the service invests in all the available human resources – including people who are incarcerated – to give all value, purpose, and hope.

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Introduction

The recidivism rate in Uganda is low, among the lowest in the world, with a rate of 13.4% (Nsimenta, 2025). Many may believe the rate is due to the conditions of confinement deterring recidivism, given overcrowding is over 360%, sleeping is restrictive in space, and the food never changes as those incarcerated eat the same simple meal twice a day, every day, all year (Mbandlwa, 2024). Despite challenging conditions, as we evidence, recidivism is low in Uganda for many progressive reasons, ranging from the life skills learned, to the discipline, to the educational opportunities, to rehabilitative initiatives, to the relationships emergent between prisoners and between prisoners and staff, and, perhaps most predominantly, due to how prisoners have purpose in prison, which equates to hope. In the current article, we speak to how the Ugandan Prisons Service (UPS) prepares those incarcerated for their return to society as law-abiding productive civilians and provide considerations for how all prison/correctional services internationally can best serve those incarcerated, recognizing how doing so further supports all staff.

Literature Review and Context

UPS is responsible for 269 prisons across 19 regions in Uganda (see: <https://www.ugandaprisons.go.ug> for the service's history). There are, as of January of 2025, 78,700 prisoners, 14,021 staff, and many babies in the prisons for women. For example, at the women's facility in the Kampala Extra Region, in November of 2025, there were 52 babies housed with their mothers. Of the prisoners, 51.8% are convicted, 47.4 are remanded into custody, and 0.8% are debtors (i.e., owing money) (data drawn from unpublished statistics from UPS). Further, staff live in barracks with their families on prison campuses, which are very modest (i.e., one room, 3 meters squared in size for Junior Ranking Officers). Conditions of confinement are strained due to overcrowding, for instance, the wards are overpopulated leaving little room for sleeping (i.e., each male prisoner has 45 inches squared to sleep). The mothers sleep with their babies, and women share bunk beds, sometimes three to a bunk. Yet, prison is far from what these conditions would suggest. Rather conditions being the "reason" or the "deterrent for returning to prison" resulting in a recidivism rate of 13.4%, perhaps the low rate is a consequence of how UPS invests in life skills and empowers prisoners and staff to grow, to have purpose, and to learn. Indeed, literature long supports how deprivations and harsh punishments do not deter crime (Chau, 2010; De Courson & Nettle, 2021; Kawachi et al., 1999; Lippke, 2011; Tullock, 1974). Further, conditions in UPS are not the consequence of deprivations or punitive orientations, they are because Uganda is a Low-Income Country (LIC), among the lowest of LICs in the world, thus, they do their best with the resources they have.

Admission with Purpose

At admission, when being received in a UPS facility, prisoners are not just assessed for risk and needs. Beyond medical testing for infectious disease, they are asked about their history, their skills, their criminality too, but the focus on is who they are – who they were prior to their incarceration and what they did as (or if) a contributing member of society. The prisoners are told they will be safe, and the prison will be their home. They are directed toward positions in the prison – basically, whatever their occupation was on the outside, they will do the same inside. And if they are with limited skills or occupational experience, they can acquire education and skills inside.

Using education as an example of giving prisoners purpose, we note how there are schools within prisons. Although the Head Instructor is a staff member, the principal and teachers are all prisoners—

the importation of the prisoners' skills and who they were - their person - into the prison. Here, qualified prisoners serve as teachers (given staff shortages), who are to prioritize their teaching during their incarceration. The schooling available starts at primary one, with many prisoners going home with diplomas to their name. Select educational opportunities, beyond a high school diploma, are limited to convicted long-term prisoners (as time is required for completion). For example, post-secondary education is offered at the Kampala Extra Region (i.e., the Luzira prisons complex), thus the Mbarara Prison Complex offers classes from primary one to senior six, then interested prisoners are transferred to the Luzira Complex for postsecondary education. To highlight, at the "Mbarara Main Prison Inmates Schools", a whiteboard on the wall baring the aforementioned schools' names outlines the school's objectives in stating:

Motto: Education for self-rehabilitation and social transformation.

Vision: The best responsive and rehabilitative inmate education in Africa.

Mission: To provide a holistic and rehabilitative inmate education that enhances social re-integration and contributes toward reduction in recidivism.

Further, agreements are in place with at least one university in Uganda for prisoners to acquire certificates, diplomas, or a degree. Further, there is an agreement with the University of London that enables prisoners, with interest, to acquire a Law Degree. Thus, education is largely run by prisoners, for prisoners, with many graduates and advanced degrees being achievable and this model is widespread across the many opportunities available at UPS for skill development and growth, some of which we now turn to discuss.

Opportunities

Rehabilitative opportunities are ingrained in the UPS mission, "to contribute to the protection and development of society by providing safe, secure, and humane custody of prisoners while placing human rights at the centre of their correctional programs," and goal, "... the transformation of every prisoner into a responsible, law-abiding, and economically productive citizen" (see: www.ugandaprison.go.ug). Thus, there is a focus on vocational training that draws on life skills to support rehabilitation and reintegration success for people incarcerated. The intention is to "transform" prisoners into "productive" citizens through "programming" while overcoming the challenges plaguing the service, like overcrowding, infectious disease, etc. To demonstrate, we outline select programs below, beyond the skills prisoners bring into prison, to evidence skills that can be acquired in prison. There are many more opportunities for skill development than those noted, from basket weaving, to cooking, to intelligence provision, positions of leadership (i.e., ward leader), even security roles. The consistent element to all programs and opportunities is how, beyond skills being transferrable when a prisoner leaves prison, they also provide prisoners with funds and, where possible, start-up supports (i.e., seeds, a sewing machine). Thus, what starts in prison continues post-release. In addition, prisoners are supported by a rehabilitation and reintegration officer, whose role is to connect prisoners with relatives to maintain their supports in the community and connection in preparation for their eventual release and to help them be accepted back into their community or society more broadly.

Agriculture and Livestock. The agricultural programs train and involve prisoners in the production of food, including vegetables, maize, sunflower, cotton, etc., while also teaching seed multiplication production at prison farms. The livestock program trains prisoners in rearing and managing animal

farms, including cattle rearing and piggery, included is developing an understanding of how manure supports agricultural. Further, these programs prepare prisoners to engage in subsistence farming, which is a pathway to sustainable living at re-entry that also supports the Ugandan economy.

Carpentry. The opportunities to learn carpentry and joinery at UPS are extensive. Prisoners make furniture (i.e., tables, chairs, beds, shelves), a lot of which is used in UPS offices and schools. Further, they make furnishings (i.e., pews, alters) for churches and other establishments, with a store front in Kampala where furniture for residential and commercial use is available for purchase or order. The furniture is sold to others as an earning opportunity for prisoners and UPS, thus supporting economic development.

Tailoring and Shoemaking. Prisoners can learn both tailoring and shoemaking in all UPS prisons, with the Luzira Prisons Complex housing the largest program with the most equipment. Prisoners tailor all uniforms and craft all shoes worn by prisoners and staff. Shoes and leather products are also sold to citizens. However, these activities do not occur in sweatshop type facilities, instead they happen around tables often in open courtyards. The skills support prisoners, including with funds post-release, and provide cost saving to UPS. Although there remains a need for more tailoring machines in UPS prisons, a skilled prisoners may be given sewing machines to use as start-up capital at release.

Counseling Services: Provided and Received. Counseling services are available to support prisoners (and staff) with mental health needs, life needs, and even to process their living conditions or health diagnosis. Both staff and prisoners offer and receive counseling services from both prisoners and staff. Prisoner with tenure inside also provide help to new prisoners as mentors while they assimilate into the prison society. Prisoners skilled and interest in counseling can acquire a counseling certificate from Makerere University.

Religious Services. Prisoners, staff, and visitors, from all dominations, lead and/or receive religious prayers and services. In some prisons, unique praying spaces exist for different faiths (i.e., Church of Uganda, Catholicism, Seventh-Day Adventism, Pentecostalism, Muslim, Hindu). Spirituality is ingrained in Ugandan culture and practice, thus provides comfort and guidance for pro-social living as a law-abiding citizen. Associated with religious services is also music, which also occurs independently with song, dance, blowing, etc.

Waste management. As a valued skill in Uganda, prisoners are trained in waste management to reduce the volume of accumulated waste via sorting, etc. Reusable waste is repurposed into resources such as animal feeds and brockets as a source of energy.

Salon. Hairstyling and barbering are essential skills, which enable talented stylists and barbers to earn a living post release in any community. Hair styling and barbering also help prisoners feel presentable and confident in their appearance.

Sport. Sport, games, and exercise are used to keep prisoners fit, healthy, and to occupy their minds. Sports are not simply afternoon causal exchanges. Instead, there are different leagues in which prisoners can participate (some they must try out for to be on a team) with tournaments. For example, at Mbarara Main Prison, an institution that houses men, there is a 14-team football league. The league

is run by a president, prisoners try out for the teams, of which 12 teams are healthy prisoners, one team is composed of prisoners with health conditions, and one team is staff. These teams compete in three tournaments a year (i.e., Easter Cup). The football is competitive and entertaining, while teaching sportsmanship and teamwork.

Practices, Policies, Considerations, and Future Research

Uganda is an LIC. Our central takeaway—our core message—here, is that no matter what a prison service has for resources much can be done because the most valuable resources present are the humans, those incarcerated and those working within the facilities. Thus, UPS invests in their people, all their people. They do much with very little, thus making the most of all they have. The process of giving prisoners responsibilities, even those equivalent to what they did on the outside, is an act of humanity, providing people with purpose and thus hope throughout their incarceration. This process also supports staff, who do not see people simply sitting and suffering. They see prisoners engaged, proud of their accomplishments, and advancing. Knowledge and skills remain the only attributes prison can never strip away, and UPS embraces and empowers people through education and opportunities.

Further, how these activities are accomplished and learned is not through hardship, chains, or punitive expectations. It is not uncommon to see a group of men laughing around a table in the sun crafting shoes, or people enjoying the salon, or in large room doing carpentry. A walk across a courtyard, if a visitor was to show interest in the weaving, would have different men bringing selected baskets, the ones they are most proud of, to demonstrate their craft and handiwork. There is pride. Staff take pride too. The football games are competitive, and one easily witnesses heated moments become deflated and teamliness thrive. The audience enjoys the game, likely as much as the players, and the coaches and president are always present. The prisoner teams will also play against the staff team, and the staff team will play teams external to the service (i.e., the military team). The staff and prisoners are not in opposition. The staff are helped and support by prisoners to manage the staffing crisis which is only exacerbated by overcrowding. The prisoners are viewed as people with purpose and abilities and called upon to maintain order and structure. The result is very low incidents of violence in Ugandan prisons, much desistence, and low recidivism.

After a sentence is complete, given the UPS does not have a parole or probation structure, former prisoners, now civilians, can and often do return to the prisons to continue to support those inside. In our experience, a former prisoner attended an event at a prison complex just recently where all three authors were involved. The individual was welcomed by all. He was now a civilian and respected as such, the visit even provided a serendipitous opportunity to reconnect with a staff member, a prison officer, who addressed him as “my son” and was instrumental during the former prisoners early days of remand for helping him assimilate. Such experiences may be unheard of in the North or West, despite how instrumental they are in rehabilitation. Former prisoners staying in contact with different staff post release is not uncommon in Uganda. All of these examples show humanity, even if the Mandela Rules are not yet fully enacted, and ensure a prisoner is always a citizen and person in their own right too. A person first, a prisoner last.

Thus, any service, no matter what the budget, the fiscal constraints, the challenges, can do more with less. To start, services can recognize the human resources – all of them. Give the prisoners roles and

purpose. Provide structures where they are responsible for their home – the prison at present is their home, thus treat and perceive the prison as such. Provide ways for prisoners to support each other, meet each other's needs, and to support staff, to remedy select challenges arising from overcrowding and staff retention (and recruitment) challenges. By making the most of what is available, giving prisoners responsibility, and they become a functioning society and learn the discipline associated with pro-social living as a contributing member of society. Purpose deters from acts of violence, reduces the aggression that results from frustration of having little to do or having a small window of time compromised by lockdowns or other complications. Further, investing in all within the prison provides opportunities for people to grow and develop, to discover elements and skills within themselves they did not know were even possible. Doing so ensures pride, self-confidence, and encourages, even supports, re-entry success.

Conclusion

We need more research in the global south, and particularly in LICs, to infuse into international knowledge about diverse processes that "work" for prison services. There is empowerment in learning how to do more with less, and in ensuring people re-entering society are best equipped to do so, always feeling personally fulfilled by their achievements. Life skills cannot be unlearned, and empowering individuals in prison with skills provides opportunities post-release as well as when inside. Further, recognizing a prisoner as a person is the embodiment of humanity, it provides prisoners with purpose, and doing so gives hope and supports staff and prisoners alike.

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