Systems Case Study: Recidivism

Recidivism—the return to crime after being imprisoned—is a major problem. In the USA, tens of thousands of people return home from prison each year. In 2006, after Prison Initiative (TAPI) brought together lawyers, activists, researchers, policy analysts, and other stakeholders of the prison system to reduce recidivism rates in the country.

Several of the entities represented at the TAPI retreat were in competition for funding to address this issue. These different entities saw their own roles in addressing recidivism as the most important (hence why they were working on it and not another approach!). They did not always see the ways in which their independent work connected to one another.

The goals of the meeting included developing a shared understanding of why the rate of return to prison was so high in the US; to strengthen working relationships between advocates working on this issue; and to deepen awareness of their interdependencies, both reinforcing and conflicting.

Working together, the actors convened at this retreat began to realize that they shared a common narrative: (1) they did this work because they believed it was an important way of helping those less fortunate; (2) they were not achieving the impact they wanted, despite their best intentions; and (3) their impact is limited because they didn't have enough resources and because of the conflicting behaviour of others in the system.

The attendees recognized that this narrative was paradoxical: progress stalled because no one had enough resources, and everyone acted in conflict with one another. If everyone only worked on their own part of the issue (and fought for resources for themselves), progress would continue to stall. They began to weave a different story: if they were hoping that others would behave differently, they themselves would have to change, too. In other words, they would have to develop a shared vision, and change together to accomplish it.

(Based on an excerpt of Stroh's *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, 2015.)

Key takeaway: The participation of all actors is crucial; as is their full engagement and willingness to take responsibility and change.