

## Decent Work to Restore the Dignity of Inmates in a Social Rehabilitation Center in Southeastern Mexico from the Perspective of Social and Solidarity Economy

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### ABSTRACT

Social reintegration programs in penitentiary centers are based on five pillars: education, health, work, training, and sports. However, their institutional implementation is limited, and formal activities are scarce. Artisanal work, a common but individual activity, faces challenges from obtaining supplies to commercialization. Based on this, the research aimed to implement a program in social and solidarity economy developed by inmates of a penitentiary center in southeastern Mexico, promoting dignified and collaborative work. Grounded in Sen's Human Development model, Frankl's Humanistic Psychology, and Max-Neef's Social and Solidarity Economy, a qualitative action research design was used. The results demonstrated that cooperativism fosters new forms of coexistence and dignity within penitentiary systems by addressing vulnerability, social marginalization, maladjustment, and social disruption, while promoting economic profitability and social welfare as key tools to reduce exclusion and build a society where each individual is the protagonist of their own development. It was concluded that the social and solidarity approach provides fairer compensation for work and incorporates ethical values, contributing to true reintegration and the restoration of the social fabric.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development, Social reintegration, Human development, Solidarity economy, Prison.

**JEL Codes:** D63 - Equity, justice, inequality, and other normative criteria and measurement, K42 - Illegal behavior and the enforcement of law, O15 - Human resources; Human development; Income distribution; Migration.

### 1. INTRODUCTION.

Human dignity is a fundamental principle in the construction of just and equitable societies (United Nations [UN], 1948; Dussel, 1998; Palacios et al., 2021). Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal [SDG 8] on decent work and economic growth proposed by the UN (2015) and the International Labour Organization [ILO] (2020), Fantuzzo (2022) and Snacken et al. (2022) assert that restoring human dignity in social reintegration centers is vital to ensuring these spaces fulfill their rehabilitative function. As Goffman (2005, 1963) argued, total institutions generate the mortification of the self by compromising the individual's identity, regardless of the negative social stigma that affects the dignity and capacity of those whom Dussel (1998) identified as the Others to interact socially.

It is important to consider that penitentiary centers have a social reintegration program that includes five axes: education, health, work, training, and sports. However, its implementation lacks systematic coverage (Buch & Sánchez, 2024), which is why its results are not very evident. Additionally, there are circumstances that directly or indirectly hinder its implementation or development.

In practice, penitentiary centers have largely remained institutions of marginalization, as they have not significantly changed. This is due to the absence of alternative programs for personal and experiential enrichment for individuals who have broken the law at some point, according to Agami (2016) and Rodríguez (2018). There may be individuals whose criminal profile makes a deep psychotherapeutic process unquestionable to generate significant changes in their worldview, which may seem chaotic and meaningless. However, as Moreno & Moreno (2024) point out, there are people who, due to situational factors and a lack of prospects, made a poor decision and paid the price of being confined in a prison.

The authors of this study, having worked in the Mexican Penitentiary System for over 15 years, confirm what Coronel & Farje (2020), Martínez (2020), and Rodríguez (2018) have stated: individuals, upon entering a penitentiary center as inmates, lose not only their freedom but also their work identity, as there is often no possibility of resuming the activities they relied on for their livelihood in society, whether as technicians, professionals, or manual workers in any economic activity.

The penitentiary center in southeastern Mexico, Quintana Roo, like most prisons in the country, exceeds the permitted limit of inmates (García, 2024; National Human Rights Commission [CNDH], 2016; National Institute of Statistics and Geography [INEGI], 2021). The Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection [SSPC] (2023), when estimating the general situation of the penitentiary system in southeastern Mexico and overcrowding, calculated an overpopulation of 33.62% in the state, with the Cancún prison being the most affected at 78.91%. According to them, Quintana Roo ranks 12th nationally in penitentiary overpopulation, where 53.9% of inmates are awaiting sentencing and have few opportunities to invest their confinement time in productive and quality activities.

### **1.1 Problem Statement.**

According to data from the institution under study, only 18% of inmates engage in paid activities. However, the economic value of their work is significantly depreciated when the institution acts as an intermediary. Typically, inmates dedicate themselves to crafting their own products, with artisanal items being the most common, among which hammocks hold a special place.

To make a hammock, a wooden frame is used, consisting of two posts connected by two slats, which are adjusted to determine the size of the hammock. For this purpose, thread is wound around a wooden needle called a shuttle, usually made of hemp. Individually, it takes between 15 to 25 days to complete a hammock, depending on its size (Graneros, 2023).

Based on observations by the researchers and statements from inmates who craft artisanal items like hammocks, the commercialization process begins with the producer, who hands the product over to someone they are regularly in contact with, often a family member who usually supplies the raw materials. Inmates agree that selling the product is not easy, a situation confirmed by their circle of friends and acquaintances, as the product is purchased at the lowest possible price. Over a six-month period, it was recorded that it takes approximately a month and a half to achieve a sale. Additionally, it was noted that the cost of producing the item varies, with the most important aspect being its craftsmanship.

During the exploratory phase, inmates who were interviewed mentioned that, since hammocks are typically sold at low prices, those who produce them live day-to-day, and their effort is not justly or equitably rewarded. As a result, their emergent needs are not met in a dignified manner, leading some inmates to eventually stop making hammocks due to the sense of exploitation they experience. However, this activity could be an excellent resource to dignify them in a socially acceptable way, thereby restoring the dignity that must be repaired to achieve genuine change and facilitate their reintegration into society.

Under these circumstances, and given the current conditions of the penitentiary center under study, the general characteristics of the population, and the common challenges faced by inmates—physically, psychologically, and legally—the following research question is posed:

### **1.2 Research Question.**

Can a social and solidarity economy [SSE] program developed by inmates of the southeastern Mexican penitentiary center be implemented through dignified and collaborative work?

### **Objective.**

This work aimed to dignify inmates of a penitentiary center in southeastern Mexico, considering that they have been stigmatized due to the crimes they committed and the harm they inflicted on society. Therefore, the objective focused on implementing an SSE (Social and Solidarity Economy) program developed by inmates of the aforementioned penitentiary center through dignified and collaborative work.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.**

### **2.1 Sen's Human Development Model.**

According to the Human Development [HD] model proposed by Sen (2023) and Nussbaum (2023), the progress of a society should be measured by the expansion of people's real freedoms to live the life they value. In the penitentiary context, decent work becomes a key tool for restoring the dignity of inmates, providing them not only with income but also opportunities to develop their capabilities and actively participate in society. Sen (2023, cited by Díaz et al., 2024) emphasizes that social justice

and equity are fundamental to building inclusive environments where everyone has access to opportunities that allow them to thrive. Based on the work of Díaz et al (2024) as well as Fantuzzo (2022), implementing dignified and collaborative work programs fosters autonomy and empowerment among inmates, reducing exclusion and promoting their social reintegration. This humanistic approach recognizes that work is not just a means of subsistence but also a vehicle for personal fulfillment and collective well-being.

## **2.2 Frankl's Humanistic Psychology.**

From Frankl's (2011) perspective, for inmates in a penitentiary center, decent work can become a source of purpose and dignity, allowing them to rebuild their identity and sense of life. Frankl (1991) argues that, even in the most adverse conditions, individuals can find meaning through actions that contribute to their own well-being and that of others. In this sense, collaborative and solidarity-based work not only offers a path to rehabilitation but also fosters values such as responsibility, cooperation, and empathy. This means that by participating in meaningful work activities, inmates can transform their prison experience into an opportunity for growth and positive contribution to their environment, strengthening their self-esteem and their connection to society. Therefore, through these practices, spaces for reflection and self-awareness are created, enabling individuals to rebuild their identity and project themselves toward a more hopeful future.

Under Frankl's (2015) approach, teamwork promotes the creation of mutual support networks, essential for facing the challenges of social reintegration. In this way, the foundations are laid for more harmonious coexistence and the effective restoration of the social fabric, both inside and outside the penitentiary center. This approach not only benefits inmates but also positively impacts the community by reducing recidivism rates and fostering a culture of inclusion and solidarity. Thus, decent work becomes a transformative tool that dignifies individuals and contributes to the construction of a more just and equitable society (Graizbord, 2023; Stott & Scopetta, 2020).

## **2.3 Max-Neef's Social and Solidarity Economy.**

Based on Max-Neef's (1991) Social and Solidarity Economy [SSE] model, which focuses on satisfying fundamental human needs such as subsistence, participation, and creation, this approach suggests that, in the penitentiary context, decent work must go beyond mere productivity. It should aim to create conditions that allow inmates to meet their basic needs and develop their human potential. The solidarity economy promotes cooperation, justice, and equity—values essential for restoring the social fabric and reducing exclusion.

As noted by Díaz et al (2024), implementing collaborative labor models, such as cooperatives or community workshops, fosters a sense of belonging and collective responsibility. This approach not only improves the living conditions of inmates but also contributes to building a more inclusive and sustainable society, where every individual has the opportunity to be the protagonist of their own development.

## **3. METHODOLOGY.**

### **3.1 Approach.**

The study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, considering that the fundamental basis of this project was the formation of values and the application of an ideology rooted in equity and respect.

The model used was action research, characterized by its application to the dynamics of interaction (Lewin, 2010), including norms, power structures, communication, socio-affective relationships, and roles and status within human groups during their consolidation process. This model was chosen because it can be applied to any type of group, whether dynamic or static, single-linked or multi-linked, with high or low mobility, task-oriented or maintenance-oriented. The importance of this model lies in its practical nature, based on the principle that it is impossible to understand human beings outside their environment and context, as Lewin (2003) argues.

### ***Relevance.***

The approach used facilitated the active participation of those involved, promoting their empowerment and the collective construction of solutions. By focusing on decent work and the social and solidarity economy, the study addressed concrete issues such as exclusion, lack of opportunities, and loss of dignity, offering viable alternatives for social reintegration. Action research allowed for the generation of practical and applicable knowledge to strengthen the social fabric both inside and outside the penitentiary center. Its social impact can translate into peace and social well-being through the reintegration of individuals who contribute to a just, equitable, and harmonious society.

### 3.2 Methodological Steps of the Research.

In this study, the model was applied as follows:

- a) *Diagnosis*. To assess the current situation of the artisans and their emerging problems, personal interviews were conducted with those involved.
- b) *Planning*. Establishment of the action plan, its goals, and timelines for achieving them.
- c) *Implementation*. Execution, dissemination of adjustments, and process monitoring.
- d) *Evaluation and Follow-up*. Verification of results and feedback on the process.

**Tabla 1.** Development of the Stages.

Stages of the Process	Goals	Timeframe	Resources
Diagnosis	Assess the real situation of the artisans	March 4–29, 2024	Paper, pencils, and recorder
Planning	Develop an action plan. Workshop: Regulation of resources and social organization.	April 2–30, 2024	Paper, pencils, folders, laptop, printer, and projector
	Workshop: Quality and values.		
	Workshop: Teamwork and work teams.		
Implementation	Execute the action plan. Conduct workshops. Organize artisan teams.	May 2–August 30, 2024	Paper, pencils, folders, laptop, printer, projector, transportation, logbook, interview guides, and field observation forms
	Monitor progress.		
	Interviews and Field Observation.		
Evaluation and Follow-up	Provide feedback on the process.	September 2–27, 2024	Transportation, logbook, interview guides, and field observation forms
Report	Prepare the final report.	October 2–15, 2024	Laptop and printer

*Note.* Table showing the goals, timelines, and resources used in the four stages of the process. Self-prepared.

### 3.3. Subjects.

A convenience sample was used, consisting of men and women who were engaged in crafting at the time of the research and who demonstrated experience in their craft. The sample size was 83 individuals, representing 7% of the general population.

**Inclusion Criteria.** Inmates of the penitentiary center who were engaged in artisanal activities at the time of the research were included; those with demonstrable skills and knowledge in the creation of artisanal products (especially hammocks). Individuals who showed interest and willingness to participate in the study were selected.

**Exclusion Criteria.** Individuals who were not inmates of the penitentiary center; those who lacked skills or experience in the production of artisanal products. Individuals who did not show willingness to participate in the study were not considered. Those who, for personal or institutional reasons, could not commit to the research process were excluded, as well as inmates who were not part of the group engaged in artisanal activities at the time of the study.

### 3.4 Research Techniques.

**Focus Group.** Following the suggestions of Espinoza et al. (2024), this technique was used to collect in-depth and specific data about the perspectives, viewpoints, behaviors, and experiences of the individuals involved in relation to the research topic.

**Autobiography.** In this study, data were collected based on the personal stories and experiences of the participants, with the aim of identifying, understanding, documenting, and examining them. This means the research focused on the narratives provided by the subjects analyzed.

**In-Depth Interview (Semi-Structured).** Following the steps outlined by Okuda & Gómez (2005), this technique was used to gather comprehensive, personalized, and contextualized information, allowing for clarification and deeper exploration of the concepts and perceptions of the participants involved in the study.

### 3.5 Data Collection Instrument.

**Interviewer (Observation).** Designed by the authors of the research, the interview questions were based on the theoretical frameworks mentioned, focusing on exploring the individual experiences of the participants. The goal was for interviewees to share detailed accounts of their experiences and significant events in their personal lives.

### 3.6 Data Recording.

**Autobiographical-Narrative Interview.** Designed by the authors of the research, the interview questions were based on the theoretical frameworks mentioned, focusing on exploring the individual experiences of the participants. The goal was for interviewees to share detailed accounts of their experiences and significant events in their personal lives.

### 3.9 Research Strategy.

**Triangulation.** This strategy enabled the collection of information from multiple perspectives, contributing to a holistic and reliable understanding of the topic under analysis, as suggested by Okuda & Gómez (2005).

## 4. RESULTS.

The information obtained from the interviews and field observations was cross-referenced as follows:

**Table 2.** Information Cross-Referencing Matrix.

	Coordinators							
	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8
<b>Team 1</b>	x		x		x		x	
<b>Team 2</b>		x		x		x		x
<b>Team 3</b>	x		x		x		x	
<b>Team 4</b>		x		x		x		x
<b>Team 5</b>	x		x		x		x	
<b>Team 6</b>		x		x		x		x
<b>Team 7</b>	x		x		x		x	
<b>Team 8</b>		x		x		x		x

*Note.* Cross-referencing of information collected between teams and coordinators. Information collected from odd-numbered teams was compared with that from odd-numbered coordinators, and the same was done for even-numbered teams and coordinators. Self-prepared.

**Table 3.** Cross-Referencing of Criteria Evaluated in June.

Criteria	Evaluation																			
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8		9		10	
	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C
<b>Resource Management</b>									x	x										
<b>Team Activity</b>							x	x												
<b>Inclusion</b>									x			x								
<b>Order</b>				x	x															
<b>Control</b>							x	x												
<b>Change</b>					x	x														
<b>Honesty value</b>								x	x											
<b>Responsibility value</b>							x			x										
<b>Equity value</b>									x	x										
<b>Cooperation value</b>									x	x										
<b>Common Goals</b>															x	x				
<b>Effective Communication</b>													x			x				

<b>Roles and Tasks</b>	x	x
<b>Commitment</b>		x x

*Note.* Summary of average evaluations of criteria assessed between odd-numbered teams, even-numbered teams, and team coordinators in June. Self-prepared.

**Table 4.** Cross-Referencing of Criteria Evaluated in September.

Criteria	Evaluation																						
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8		9		10				
	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C			
<b>Resource Management</b>															x	x							
<b>Team Activity</b>																		x	x				
<b>Inclusion</b>																		x	x				
<b>Order</b>													x						x				
<b>Control</b>															x	x							
<b>Change</b>																			x	x			
<b>Honesty value</b>																			x	x			
<b>Responsibility value</b>																			x	x			
<b>Equity value</b>															x	x							
<b>Cooperation value</b>															x	x							
<b>Common Goals</b>																			x	x			
<b>Effective Communication</b>																			x	x			
<b>Roles and Tasks</b>																			x	x			
<b>Commitment</b>																			x	x			

*Note.* Summary of average evaluations of criteria assessed between odd-numbered teams, even-numbered teams, and team coordinators in September. Self-prepared.

### 5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.

It is understood that penitentiary centers must go beyond being places of punishment for individuals who have committed crimes. Despite what authoritarian societies may think, inmates have not lost their rights as human beings, and dignified treatment that respects their physical and mental integrity must be guaranteed.

According to the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation [SCJN] (2023), penitentiary work is considered a means to prepare inmates for re-entry into the labor market. As Palummo et al. (2011) point out, this implies that productive activity should be seen as both an obligation and an opportunity for personal and professional development. Despite the existing legal framework, Hoyos et al. (2023) argue that there are challenges in the effective implementation of penitentiary work, such as low or nonexistent compensation for the products or activities carried out.

Penitentiary centers have often been labeled as "universities of crime" because they have primarily served as temporary holding facilities for individuals who have broken the law. Upon release, these individuals often continue their criminal careers with greater intensity and destructive potential (Arellano, 2021). This situation calls for a rethinking of the dynamics of confinement institutions to fulfill a duty that society demands and its citizens require (Helepololei, 2024). This aligns with the comments of informants during the exploratory phase, who noted that, despite the institution's rigorous control measures over inmates' daily lives, a subculture with greater influence and impact exists among inmates. It is this subculture that shapes daily behavior and must be addressed if true reintegration is to be achieved. Goffman (2005) describes how the structure of these institutions seeks to mold behavior and identities according to the norms established by authority. However, another reality exists, driven by survival, which must also be acknowledged.

It is important to note that crime is often the result of social contradictions and a chain of violence that the state itself has fostered, directly through corruption or indirectly by turning a blind eye (Tonkonoff, 2012).

Additionally, according to the institution's own statistics, the average inmate population is between 25 and 46 years old, meaning they are part of the economically active population of the country. These individuals should be contributing to improving their communities through their work. Instead, they are in a condition where they not only fail to contribute but also hinder society's ability to achieve quality of life and collective well-being. These are the individuals who need to be rescued from this impoverishing and marginalizing condition (Fraile, 2023; German et al., 2023).

The authors of this study, based on Sen's Human Development [HD] approach (1987; 2009), argue that if strategies are implemented to enrich their capabilities, inmates will be better positioned to take advantage of the few or many opportunities society can offer. Therefore, establishing strategies through social and solidarity economy programs can not only generate material wealth but, more importantly, create a new perspective on healthier and more creative ways of being in the world, grounded in well-established ethical values, as Sen (1987; cited by Ragkousis, 2024) suggests.

Engels (2014) asserts that work not only produces wealth by transforming nature and generating goods to meet human needs but also creates a more important wealth: the transformation of the individual who performs it. Thus, it can be argued that work, with its incalculable value, has created humanity.

For Marx (1967), work is the activity through which humans transform reality to satisfy their physical and spiritual needs. However, in industrial society, work is often experienced as an alienating activity rather than a means of self-realization. Sartre (1966) argues that having, doing, and being are the guiding conditions of human existence. He considers that acting means transforming the world, using resources to achieve a goal, introducing modifications within a process associated with expected outcomes.

The person-centered approach establishes that individuals are capable of expanding their talents (capabilities/competencies) if they find the right conditions to do so. They can also consciously assume their experiences to direct their existence sensibly. Following this line of thought, Rogers (2004) states, "One cannot effectively manage what one does not consciously perceive" (p. 157). This is the foundation of the concept of the Self, which includes experiences and learning as part of a growth process that will enable individuals to make decisions focused on their development, with the freedom to be happy with themselves, others, and the reality that provides them with security, dignity, and the hope of achieving their desires.

The Human Development model, paradoxically, is based on human freedom, which inmates in a penitentiary do not have. However, Sen's (2000) concept of freedom goes beyond mere material possibilities. It can also be understood that there are individuals who are legally free but are prisoners of their life conditions. Therefore, the goal of this approach is to promote dignity through respectable and recognized work. According to Sen (2009), it is important to remember that the Human Development Index (HDI) is not solely based on numerical characteristics. While these are important, the index of discontent vs. satisfaction is equally significant. Thus, it is considered that an unemployed person faces challenges in practicing freedom, as human life must be taken into account. Sen (2000) argues that if an individual, regardless of who they are, finds reasons not to want to be unemployed, and that reason exists—since work provides security, income, self-respect, and the respect of others—then employment itself becomes an important virtue.

Humanistic psychology has a profound phenomenological orientation that has guided psychology since the 1950s toward a more complex but more accurate understanding of human nature. Frankl (1985) believes that humans are always oriented toward finding meaning beyond themselves, and this transcendence is the essence of being human. Humans aspire to be happy and worthy of happiness. But more than that, according to Frankl (1991), they seek foundations for happiness, and meaningful work is a pathway to achieving it.

Inequality in real opportunities for growth and the inequitable distribution of wealth have led to the creation of new development models that prioritize quality of life and overall well-being.

The social and solidarity economy [SSE], according to Max-Neef (1994), is of fundamental importance because it places capital at the service of people, reversing capitalist ideology, which viewed individuals as important primarily for generating wealth—that is, placing individuals at the service of wealth. Individualism is set aside to enter a new order where the idea that what is good for one should be good for all is established, avoiding exclusion and marginalization. This is because the foundation of SSE is based on values, not money, as Montoya (2011) states. He affirms that it is an alternative model designed for popular majorities in the economic, social, political, cultural, and ideological sectors. This model is based on the collective and solidarity efforts of these communities, aiming to address issues related to the environment, poverty, and social exclusion, both in rural and urban areas, while contributing to the eradication of the causes of these situations.

Prisons, as they are commonly called, have had no other purpose than to isolate individuals who have broken the law, at least from a legal perspective, and to establish a stigma that may follow them forever, as Goffman (2005) asserts. This condition carries social weight and leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Mateo et al. (2023) explain: upon release, individuals are viewed with distrust and often return to prison. On the other hand, the time inmates spend incarcerated can form habits disconnected from the ideal of creating a space for reintegration preparation (Martínez & Chávez, 2023; Martínez & Paredes, 2023).

Velázquez (2023) notes that in these institutions, individualism and a lack of intention to establish cooperative bonds for a common purpose are common, due to the organizational culture, typical interaction processes, and implicit adjustments of roles and status, all associated with the mental state and personal characteristics of the inmates. Sensitivity to the work and effort of others is often absent and must be fostered (Moreno & Moreno, 2023). The formation of values in this population is more important than ever, especially in a context where violence and corruption are being combated, with results that, while progressing, require greater dedication to make the desired change evident (SSPC, 2023). Prisons have been places of punishment rather than spaces for formative development. While the state aspires to provide education to broaden inmates' worldviews, training to expand skills, work to generate income, and sports and health programs to promote healthy minds in healthy bodies, attempts to implement reintegration programs often remain as good intentions due to a lack of resources or systematization. Reintegration is a social condition to which society should aspire, especially if it is understood that violence is not combated with violence but through the formation of values and the creation of concrete opportunities (López, 2018). To consider violence as both the beginning and end of a social ill, with punishment as the only alternative, is an oversimplification of reality. From a phenomenological perspective, it can be observed that the distorted values of inmates are similarly distorted in society as a whole, with offenders reflecting a nuanced and complex version of what occurs on a broader stage.

## 6. CONCLUSION.

This study was able to validate the assumption that gave rise to this research, which posited that dignified and collaborative work, fostered by a social and solidarity economy program, generates well-being and quality of life for inmates in a penitentiary center. It is evident that when individuals are given a real opportunity for change, and when the actors involved commit to the process, their capacity to respond grows, and their level of maturity increases as part of a personal commitment and the effect of evident social pressure. When they know how to effectively manage their material and human resources, they contribute willingly and perform effectively, increasing group locomotion and cohesion. Gradually, the group transitions from being merely a task group to a maintenance group, as Lewin (2010) mentions when discussing the group process that involves inclusion, control, and affection.

According to studies by Moreno & Moreno (2024), workers with a high level of psychological and work maturity possess values such as honesty, responsibility, equity, and cooperation. When this information was shared with the inmates, it was evident that they tried to follow the model of behavior presented to them. By possessing the knowledge and skills to work in teams, along with the corresponding monitoring to correct deviations, their level of enthusiastic participation increases, and an atmosphere of cordiality and camaraderie is experienced.

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