

**Reflections of my visit to Verona (Italy) Correctional Facility and engagement with project
“Alteritas Interazione tra I popoli”**

Puleng Segalo



A beautiful summer day in Verona--- I walked through the gates and handed in my passport. I received a warm welcome and was given a tag that said "All access". The director, a medium height woman with a contagious smile stretched out her hand to welcome me and with a translator between us we had a fruitful conversation after which we took a walk to see the premises and for visitation. Huge security gates were opened and long keys were hanging on the side of the pocket of the gentleman accompanying us. We walked from one building to the next and saw a few men playing football, one attempted to get the attention of the director, and another followed... We approached a door and inside the place was buzzing, the movement and synchrony of it all was like a dance sequence. I saw smiles and acknowledgement as our presence was noticed--- this weaving of movement was from every side and there was order and calmness that put me at ease. A group of gentlemen at work! After some moments in this place we moved to another section, men and women sitting together listening to the director (the film director), again bright smiles welcomed us and after a moment of introductions they gave me a taste of what they do--- a beautiful song from a young gentleman, he sang and tears started flowing from his face... What a moving moment! From here we walked to a section where the most beautiful

artwork greeted us at the entrance--- expression of self, of life, and of pain, was flowing in the colors, the details and every contour of each painting... Around the corner was a room full of women at work, the one by the door (a gorgeous Nigerian lady with a beautiful hairstyle and impeccable make up) welcomed me (it was so good to hear English) and as I entered, I saw more African sisters and a few Asian ladies. For some strange reason they seemed very calm and 'at home'. The Nigerian ladies were very happy to see me and we chatted briefly. After spending hours here I walked out, given my passport and huge gates opened for me--- I easily walked in and I could easily walk out--- I have my freedom! This was my day spent at a correctional facility in Verona!

I spent the morning with the minister of social development in the local government of Verona, and spent some time with colleagues from the ministry of Justice! As we try to make sense of the challenges that our society/ies face, it is critical to take note of the complexities of people's life experiences. When we judge, think of rehabilitation, imagine the results of gender/domestic violence, we cannot but take note of the interconnected of the spaces we inhabit. Today I learnt a lot--- I experienced generosity, saw kindness in the midst of adversity and got reminded of the complexity of this thing called life! (July 16th , 2015)

The above is a personal reflection of my visit to Verona, Italy. I met with the members of Alteritas – Interazione tra I popoli (Interaction among peoples)

(<http://www.progettoalteritas.org/>) which focuses on many activities; among these is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project in collaboration with the detainees at a correctional facility in Verona. The aim of the prison project was to investigate the interactions of incarcerated peoples of different cultures and languages: “their perception of the *Otherness* and how they change their prejudices after having been for a long time in a prison. The research output about their perception of the self and of their condition came along together with the other line of investigation” (Simona, project leader/coordinator). Some of the results of the study which were shared with me centered on how being incarcerated affects the detainees. For many, prison contributes towards the rethinking of themselves, some felt that it is safer in prison as the outside world may sometimes be too violent. Some reflections from inmates:

- *Outside prison I am not myself, I wear a mask and I am stereotyped, you can hide yourself.*
- *Inside prison you cannot hide yourself, you reconstruct yourself.*
- *You learn to coexist and rework concept of otherness.*

My visit also involved a number of meetings with many stakeholders who are engaged with societal issues. I met colleagues from the ministry of justice, social development and the department of correctional services. My visit to Verona was an eye opener and an opportunity to think about how our work and experiences can translate in various contexts. The meeting resulted in conversations about possible collaborations and an international meeting which will aim at bringing together various scholars, activists, and researchers who are involved and are doing work/interested in doing work on issues pertaining to corrections. I bring these experiences back to our community engagement project *Inside-out-outside-in*. <http://insideoutoutsidein.co.za/> with the hope that it will contribute towards our continuous thinking about and seeking ways to get involved and collaborate with the correctional services.