SHAPING THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL REHABILITATION IN PRISONS

EVIDENCE, PRACTICE AND GLOBAL LESSONS FROM UNICRI'S DIGITAL REHABILITATION IN PRISONS PROJECT

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United Nations
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PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

This paper presents a summary of the design, delivery and outcomes of a series of evidence-informed Digital Rehabilitation (DR) workshops implemented by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) in 2025. The workshops were delivered in cooperation with international consultants and with the financial support of UNAFEI and the Ministry of Justice of Japan, and in partnership with the Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ) and the Namibian Correctional Service (NCS).

The document is intended for policymakers, correctional leaders and practitioners engaged in the development or implementation of digital approaches to rehabilitation. It serves two primary purposes: first, to document the value and practical impact of the workshops conducted to date; and second, to outline emerging lessons, legacy elements and forward pathways for prison services in Thailand, Namibia and other jurisdictions exploring digital rehabilitation, including planned pilot initiatives.

The work builds on and operationalises the principles set out in UNICRI's Digital Rehabilitation in Prisons (2024), translating research findings into policy-relevant insights and practice-oriented guidance for correctional settings, with a view to strengthening evidence-based rehabilitation frameworks and supporting responsible digital transformation in prison systems.

OVERVIEW OF THE DIGITAL REHABILITATION WORKSHOPS

UNICRI's Digital Rehabilitation workshops were designed as structured, participatory and context-sensitive capacity-building interventions. Delivered over multiple days, the workshops combined:

- Conceptual foundations of digital rehabilitation and digital right.

- Comparative international evidence and case studies.

- Practical group-based design exercises.

- Pre - and post-training surveys to capture learning gains and readiness for implementation.

Rather than promoting technology adoption in isolation, the workshops positioned digital tools as *enablers of rehabilitation*, supporting reintegration, digital inclusion and institutional legitimacy.

The workshops were led by UNICRI and informed by prior field visits and in-country consultations, including missions to Thailand (July 2024) and Namibia (November 2024), as well as consultations with national practitioners. This preparatory work ensured that each workshop was tailored to national contexts, operational realities and institutional priorities.

The workshop with the Namibian Correctional Service (March 2025) prioritised foundational capacity-building, awareness-raising and practical feasibility in resource-constrained settings. The workshop with the Thailand Institute of Justice (October 2025) placed greater emphasis on strategic planning and policy development for digital rehabilitation, with active participation from senior leadership and policy actors.

Across both contexts, available evidence indicates measurable learning gains, stronger conceptual alignment around rehabilitative objectives, and increased strategic confidence among participants in pursuing digital rehabilitation pathways.

KEY EVIDENCE AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

Drawing on pre- and post-workshop surveys with participants, facilitated exercises and qualitative feedback, several consistent outcomes emerged across both jurisdictions:

- **Improved conceptual clarity:** Participants demonstrated stronger consensus that digital technologies in prisons should serve rehabilitation and reintegration objectives, rather than primarily surveillance or administrative functions.

- **Enhanced understanding of digital inclusion:** Digital inequality was increasingly recognised as a systemic rehabilitative issue with implications for reintegration and social inclusion, rather than solely a technical or infrastructural concern.

- **Greater confidence and readiness:** Participants reported increased confidence in aligning digital tools with institutional capacity, security requirements and rehabilitative goals.

- **Commitment to co-design:** There was a strong endorsement of participatory models involving correctional staff, people in custody and relevant external partners in the design and implementation of digital initiatives.

These outcomes closely mirror the implementation principles outlined in UNICRI's *Digital Rehabilitation in Prisons report (2024)*, providing practical validation of its framework in diverse operational contexts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICY

The workshops generated several policy-relevant insights for jurisdictions considering or advancing digital rehabilitation initiatives:

- **Digital rehabilitation is a strategic investment.** Incremental, well-governed digital initiatives can contribute to reintegration outcomes and institutional efficiency when anchored in national correctional policy frameworks and aligned with rehabilitative objectives.

- **Policy must address digital rights and inclusion**. Equitable access, data protection, proportionality and ethical governance are essential to ensuring legitimacy, trust and long-term sustainability of digital initiatives in correctional settings.

- **Leadership endorsement is critical to implementation.** Visible commitment from senior leadership supports cultural change, signals institutional priorities and helps mitigate resistance to new approaches.

- **Staff engagement is central to successful implementation.** Digital change also requires mentorship, gradual exposure, and participatory design to engage custodial and program staff.

- **Pilot initiatives are essential for evidence generation**. Small-scale, well-designed and well-evaluated pilots can provide practical insights, reduce implementation risks and inform responsible national scale-up and cross-jurisdictional learning.
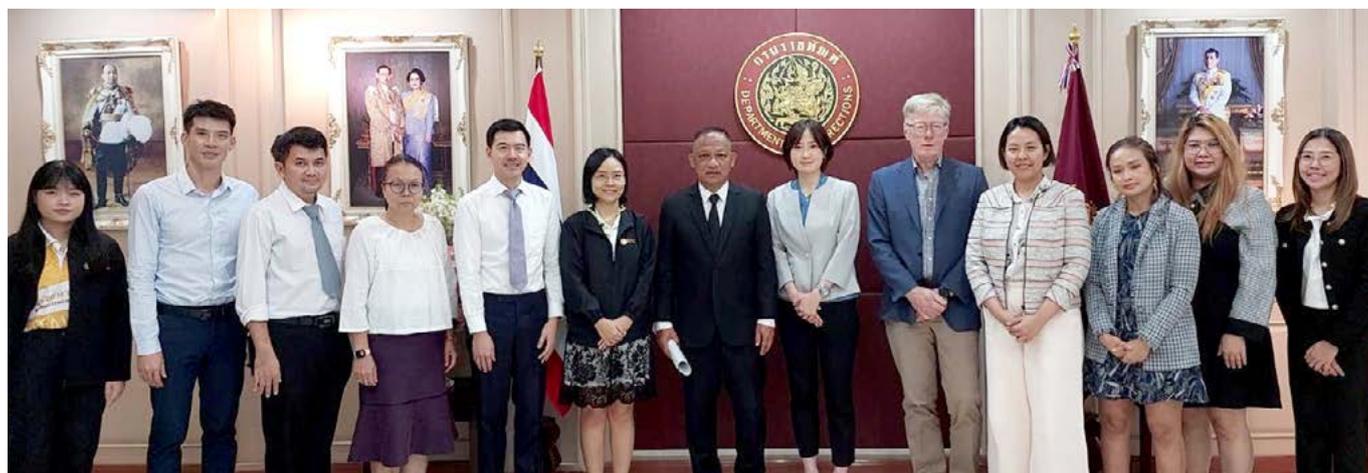
KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTICE

For practitioners and prison services, the workshops highlighted several practical considerations for the responsible use of digital technologies in rehabilitation:

- Digital rehabilitation is most effective when it complements existing programmes rather than replacing human interaction.

- Staff training and confidence-building are as critical as technological infrastructure.

- VR, mobile applications and self-service platforms show particular promise for vocational training, mental health support and family connection — provided that appropriate safeguards and risk-management measures are in place.

- Evidence-informed workshop models provide a replicable yet context-specific pathway for other services seeking to establish digital rehabilitation.

The participatory workshop format itself emerged as a transferable model of practice, enabling services to design solutions grounded in their own operational realities and the needs of people they serve.

LEGACY AND ADDED VALUE

The legacy of this work extends beyond the delivery of individual workshops and contributes to longer-term institutional and policy development:

- **Operationalising research into practice.** The initiative translates UNICRI's global research on digital rehabilitation into actionable, context-responsive and locally owned strategies within participating jurisdictions.

- **Developing a shared conceptual foundation.** The workshops helped establish a common language and understanding of digital rehabilitation across diverse correctional contexts, supporting more coherent policy and practice discussions.

- **Laying the groundwork for sustained learning.** The work provides a foundation for longitudinal evaluation, knowledge-sharing and cross-national comparison of digital rehabilitation approaches.

Importantly, the workshops illustrate how evidence-informed capacity-building can strengthen institutional readiness and strategic planning, enabling prison services to engage more confi-

dently with funders, technology providers and policymakers on future digital initiatives.

NEXT STEPS: FROM WORKSHOPS TO PILOTS

Building on this foundation, next steps include:

- **Development of a needs-driven Virtual Reality (VR) pilot initiative**. With support from UNAFEI and the Ministry of Justice of Japan, a pilot initiative is planned to explore the use of VR for psychosocial rehabilitation, with attention to ethical safeguards, feasibility and user needs.

- **Ongoing evaluation and knowledge generation.** UNICRI will support the monitoring and evaluation of pilot activities, contributing to the global evidence base on digital rehabilitation in correctional settings.

- **Adaptation of the workshop model to additional contexts.** The DR workshop methodology may be tailored and applied in other jurisdictions seeking to develop or strengthen digital rehabilitation pathways, subject to national priorities and capacities.

These next steps represent a natural progression from capacity-building to implementation, ensuring that the value of the workshops translates into sustained system-level impact.

CONCLUSION

The UNICRI Digital Rehabilitation workshops implemented with the Thailand Institute of Justice and the Namibian Correctional Service demonstrate the practical value of evidence-informed and participatory approaches to correctional innovation. Grounded in UNICRI's Digital Rehabilitation in Prisons framework, the initiative illustrates how research, policy and operational practice can be brought into closer alignment to support ethical, inclusive and effective digital transformation in prison systems.

The outcomes achieved to date, together with planned pilot initiatives and continued evaluation, indicate a constructive pathway for jurisdictions seeking to introduce digital tools in a responsible and rehabilitative manner. More broadly, this experience highlights the role that structured, evidence-based capacity-building can play in supporting correctional systems to navigate digital change while upholding human rights and rehabilitative principles.

As prison systems worldwide continue to confront the opportunities and risks associated with digitalisation, this work contributes to a growing body of knowledge on how digital innovation can be integrated thoughtfully, proportionately and in ways that strengthen reintegration outcomes and institutional legitimacy.