

UNODC's scenario-based e-learning course on the Nelson Mandela Rules¹

Translating international minimum standards on the treatment of prisoners into practical guidance for prison and corrections officers

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Abstract

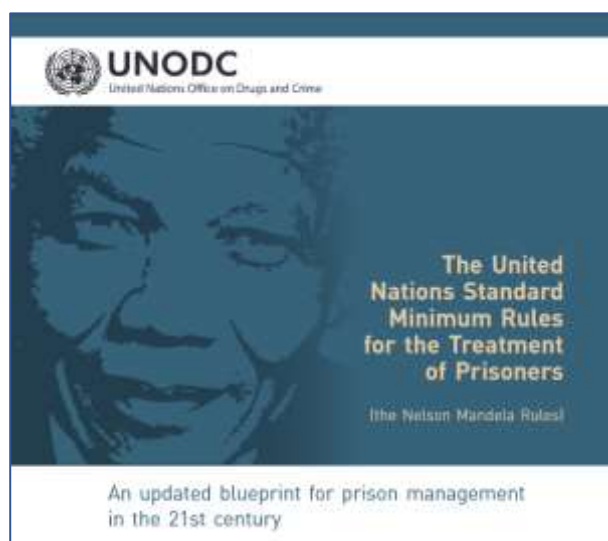
This paper describes the recent initiative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to develop an e-learning platform on the Nelson Mandela Rules. The paper outlines the structure and content of the e-learning course and some of its special features. It discusses how UNODC has launched the course to date and the plans for the future in order to generate and strengthen global interest in utilising the Nelson Mandela Rules as a trigger for prison reform. This includes a sustained outreach campaign targeting national prison and corrections administrations, with a focus on prison staff training schools and academies.

Introduction

The [UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#), also known as “[the Nelson Mandela Rules](#)”, constitute the universally acknowledged minimum standards for the management of prison facilities and the treatment of prisoners. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015 after an extensive [revision process](#) of the original version of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules from 1955, the updated Rules continue to be of tremendous value and influence in the development of prison policies, laws and practices in countries all over the world.

As the custodian of the Nelson Mandela Rules, the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) (UNODC) intensified its efforts to ensure that the adoption of the Rules would be followed by tangible change on the ground. To this end, UNODC is heavily engaged in developing and updating guidance material concerning prison management as well as in providing technical assistance to requesting Member States. In 2018 alone, UNODC trained more than 2,200 prison officers on good prison management based on the Nelson Mandela Rules, and advised prison administrators in more than 70 countries.

Having continuously supported the process of revising the Rules, including extensive efforts to identify consensus on controversial areas, we considered it essential to “translate” this core



¹ UNODC's e-learning course on the Nelson Mandela Rules was generously funded by the Governments of Germany and South Africa.

international standard into practical guidance. In this regard, we fully recognize that the men and women who will play the most crucial role in promoting the practical application of the Nelson Mandela Rules are prison and corrections officers. The e-learning platform has therefore been tailored to their roles in turning the Rules into action. While certainly not the only relevant stakeholders, it is clear that sustainable change cannot be achieved without the active buy-in and ownership of those who are in charge of ensuring the safe, secure and humane custody of prisoners.

Two first important steps were UNODC’s development and publication of (i) a [Checklist on Assessing Compliance with the Nelson Mandela Rules](#), which is geared towards internal inspection mechanisms in prison and corrections administrations; and (ii) a series of [Instructional Placards](#) on priority issues addressed in the Rules, designed to be posted in prison facilities for raising the awareness of prisoners and officers alike.



Further underpinning the development of UNODC’s online course on the Nelson Mandela Rules was the acknowledgment that prisons and corrections professionals belong to one of the most demanding professions in the criminal justice system, while public perception still very much lags behind in terms of the recognition they deserve for performing a social service of great importance. Recognising this, UNODC determined it was both highly appropriate and necessary that a comprehensive online e-learning package be developed to “operationalise” how they are expected to contribute to ensuring the humane treatment of prisoners.

Towards enhancing and refining training of prison and corrections officers

At the global level, training schemes for prison and corrections officers vary significantly in terms of quality, length and content. Many Member States still struggle to provide the type of training which gives justice to the multi-faceted nature of their profession. Often, training tends to focus heavily on prison security and related protocols and give little or no attention to the many inter-personal skills that are required to effectively engage with the prison population with a view to ensure not only security, but also safety, humane treatment and rehabilitation.

While national prison legislation, regulations and standing orders are typically covered, international standards, such as the Nelson Mandela Rules, are rarely addressed in-depth.

UNODC’s e-learning course, which is tailored to the needs of prison and corrections officers, is intended to contribute to filling this gap.

Four overall objectives guided UNODC during the 18-months development phase, namely:

- (i) to meet the challenge of “concretizing” the meaning and intent of each of the Nelson Mandela Rules and to showcase how they can be applied in practice;
- (ii) to develop a tool tailored for prison and corrections officers in light of their essential role in ‘making a difference’ in prisons;
- (iii) to go beyond “traditional” e-learning and produce an innovative product which illustrates, as much as possible, the application of the content of the Rules; and
- (iv) to maximize the global applicability of the course content and to facilitate an easy inclusion of the product into national prison staff training curricula.

These objectives led UNODC to opt for a scenario-based e-learning course which integrates theoretical learning with concrete scenarios of prison management situations. Rather than creating cartoons of prison management scenarios as is the typical practise for traditional prison-based e-learning courses, it was determined that the scenarios would be filmed in actual prison facilities. UNODC is greatly indebted to Algeria, Argentina and Switzerland for their willingness to allow filming in their facilities. Adopting this approach further resulted in UNODC reaching out to more than 20 national prison and corrections administrations² and numerous international entities, which generously provided support by providing prison-related imagery as well as by sharing good practice and advice.



The final version of the course was reviewed and validated by an International Advisory Board of prison experts and practitioners from Argentina, Canada, Germany, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Sweden, Thailand and UNODC.

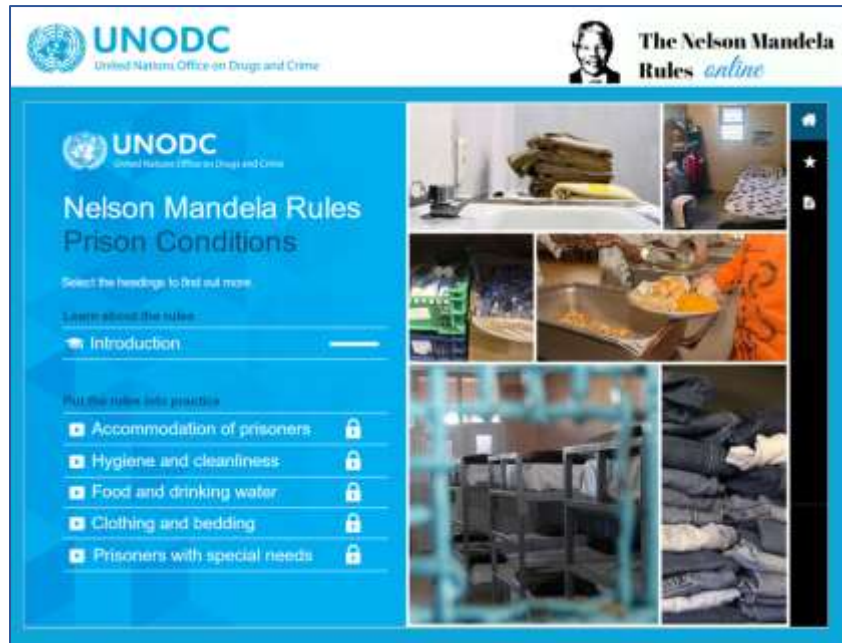
UNODC’s e-learning course on the Nelson Mandela Rules – Structure and content

This course consists of six self-paced modules which can be completed in approximately four hours. Resource materials, produced by UNODC and other relevant international entities, are referenced throughout the course providing access to more in-depth guidance material on specific aspects of prison management. The course covers the most important aspects of prison management and includes, more specifically, the following modules:

² These included Bolivia, Canada, Burkina-Faso, the Dominican Republic, Fiji, Finland, Germany, Indonesia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Mexico, Namibia, Nepal, the State of Palestine, Panama, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand and Zambia.

1. Overview

This module introduces the user to the background of the course and the development of the Nelson Mandela Rules into what became the globally recognized blueprint for prison management. It highlights the basic principles governing the Rules as a whole, the important benefits of applying the Rules in practice and the crucial role which prison and corrections officers play in this regard.



2. Prison conditions

This module covers minimum prison conditions and basic services, which provide a fundamental basis for preserving the dignity, well-being, health and safety of prisoners. It includes the fundamental requirement of separating different categories of prisoners as well as prisoners' access to suitable accommodation, sanitary facilities, nutrition and clothing.

3. The Prison Regime

This module elaborates on the need to establish a constructive prison regime that facilitates and supports the rehabilitation of prisoners and effectively prepares them for their social reintegration upon release. It covers both the need to classify prisoners in order to individualise their treatment as well as different categories of rehabilitation programmes and other relevant services.

4. Safety and Security

This module provides guidance on how to preserve prison safety and security, giving particular attention to the benefits of positive staff-prisoner relationships. It singles out security procedures which require particular attention and elaborates on how to respond to infractions and offences committed by prisoners, including the imposition of disciplinary sanctions.

5. Health Care

This module covers physical and mental health care services in prisons, including the role of prison officers in supporting the work of health-care professionals. It covers the access of prisoners to health-care services upon admission and in the course of imprisonment as well as guidance on the roles and responsibilities of health-care professionals working in prisons.

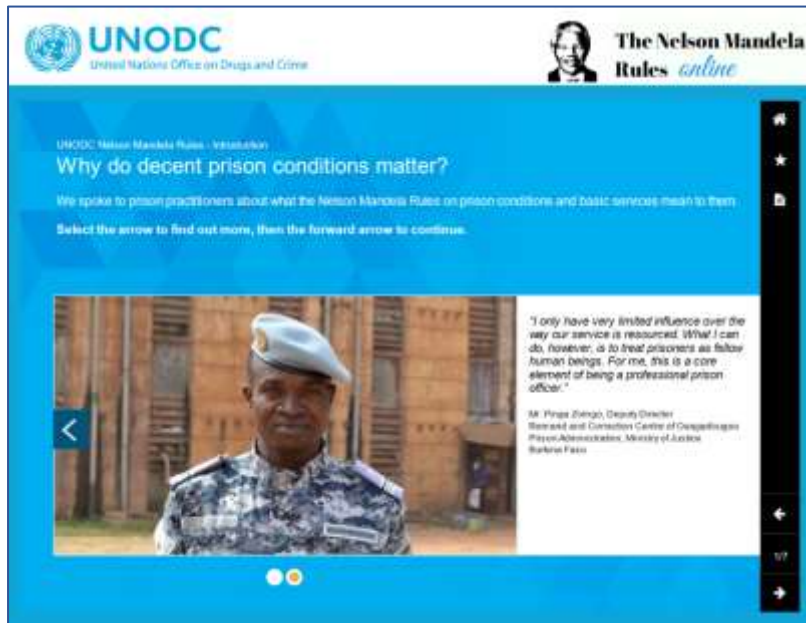
6. Safeguards

This module highlights key safeguards required to preserve the integrity and legitimacy of prison management. It covers a broad range of preventive and responsive measures aimed at protecting the fundamental rights of prisoners. Importantly, these include prisoners' continuous access to relevant external parties, including representatives from an independent inspection body.

7. Final Assessment

This module assesses the user's knowledge on the Nelson Mandela Rules and their practical application which he or she acquired throughout the course. Upon successful completion of the assessment, which consists of 14 questions, the user will be issued a certificate of having completed and passed UNODC's e-learning course on the Nelson Mandela Rules.

UNODC's e-learning course on the Nelson Mandela Rules – Special features



Each of the substantive modules consists of a first part on “*Learning about the Rules*”, in which the user is familiarised with the content of the relevant Rules, and a second part entitled “*Putting the rules into practice*”.

The first part is always framed by two core questions in the beginning and at the end, namely: (i) the question of why this topic actually matters – with the answer provided by prison and corrections officers who address their peers with a respectful quotation; and,

secondly: (ii) the question of what prison and corrections officers can do in the course of their daily work to give actual meaning to the Rules.

The second part contains five concrete scenarios per substantive module in which the users are exposed to short interactive videos in which they need to choose from several options on how to best respond to a given situation.

These scenarios provide a range of real life situations, such as: Reacting to a conflict between two prisoners which is getting out of hand and requires the intervention of prison staff; a first time visitor becoming agitated and refusing to be searched; the management of



prisoners with special needs, such as foreign prisoners; complaints mechanisms; responding to a medical emergency which requires the transfer of a prisoners to an outside hospital; or a visit by an external inspection body shortly after a prison riot was brought back under control.

These scenarios are very concrete and occur in many institutions frequently, yet rarely are the circumstances such that a prescribed response would be appropriate. Instead prison and corrections officers must determine the decisions they will make. The strength of the e-learning programme lies in revealing the very different consequences that the various options are likely to lead to. Upon having chosen one of the available options, the video continues to show the user the likely outcome of his or her decision, including on whether the decision was compliant with provisions in the Nelson Mandela Rules.

UNODC filmed the above scenarios with both male and female prison and corrections officers, who volunteered – with great enthusiasm – to take part in this project, and who acted as both officers and prisoners.

UNODC’s e-learning course on the Nelson Mandela Rules – Launch, access and follow-up

The English version of the course was formally launched in Vienna on 21st May 2019 in the margins of the 28th session of the [Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice](#). The launch took the form of a high-level and very well-attended [Special Event](#) dedicated to “Equipping prison officers to apply the Nelson Mandela Rules in practice”, which was hosted by the Group of Friends of the Nelson Mandela Rules – a Group of more than 30 like-minded Permanent Missions to the United Nations in Vienna. High-level representatives, including Commissioner-/Director-Generals and prison experts from, inter alia, Argentina, Algeria, Namibia and Sweden, all praised the course as a very innovative, user-friendly and highly relevant tool to enrich prison and corrections officers training and to instil core provisions from international minimum standards in a practice-oriented manner.

The online course is now available free of charge and can be accessed via the following link: <https://golearn.unodc.org/lms/course/view.php?id=436>. The user will first be asked to register before being directed to the course. In case of any issues encountered in registering or accessing the course, users can contact the UNODC e-learning helpdesk at unodc-elearning@un.org. The course is now available in English, Arabic, French, Russian and Spanish, thereby maximizing its potential use in different jurisdictions. A dedicated feature in the course will allow UNODC to generate anonymized data on the numbers and organizational affiliations of users, further disaggregated by gender and country of origin.

The feedback received from all members of the International Advisory Board established to review and validate the e-learning course and its content was very positive (e.g., “The gold standard for e-learning which is strongly aligned with adult learning principles”; “Well-arranged, user-friendly, and easily comprehensible – everyday life in the prison and corrections environment is presented in a very realistic manner and the information provided are relevant throughout”; “A good product which we will surely be able to promote in our discussions with prison authorities and advocate for in training session for frontline staff”; “Great experience participating and contributing to this project”). Furthermore, UNODC received very positive signals from the prison staff training institutes where the scenarios were filmed, including from the corresponding “actors”, regarding their dedication to incorporate the online course and further scenario-based training initiatives into their regular curricula.

Following finalization and translation of the course in each official UN language, UNODC will engage in a sustained outreach campaign targeting national prison and corrections administrations, with a focus on prison staff training schools and academies, with a view to generate further interest, to promote the actual use of the course and its inclusion, as appropriate, into regular national training curricula. Already ahead of this campaign, more than 400 users enrolled in the course by

mid-August 2019. Furthermore, UNODC field-based projects have started to incorporate the course into their technical assistance activities, as in Indonesia on the occasion of the Nelson Mandela International Day on 18 July 2019.



We hope that with this product, we have not only provided a meaningful and practice-oriented tool to promote the practical application of the Nelson Mandela Rules, but will also stimulate further thought on delivering the type of practical, multi-faceted and scenario-based training to prison and corrections officers which gives justice to their complex tasks and overall assignment.

Join us in making a change and [register now!](#)

About the author:



Philipp Meissner, Inter-regional Advisor, serves as the focal point for prison reform in the Justice Section of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), for which he has been working for the past eleven years.

During his tenure, he has focused on penal reform efforts from different angles, including standard-setting, technical advisory services and the implementation of technical assistance projects. Importantly, he accompanied and supported the inter-governmental process to update the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, which led to the adoption of the Nelson Mandela Rules by the UN General Assembly in 2015.

A major focus of his work relates to translating the Nelson Mandela Rules into practice-oriented guidance for prison and corrections officers and to service inter-governmental mechanisms of Member States with a shared interest in prison management issues, such as the Group of Friends of the Nelson Mandela Rules. Recent tools developed under his guidance include, inter alia, a checklist on assessing compliance with the Nelson Mandela Rules and the first scenario-based e-learning course on the Rules.

Mr. Meissner also led UNODC's engagement in the specific field of addressing the manifestation of violent extremism in prisons, including the development of its Handbook on the management of violent extremist prisoners and the prevention of radicalization to violence in prisons – the first manual dedicated to this topic at the level of the UN.

He provided technical advice to prison and corrections administrations on all continents and was involved in the design and implementation of numerous prison reform projects. Longer-term field assignments included, inter alia, the State of Palestine and Cambodia.

Mr. Meissner is a German national. He obtained a Master's degree in political science from Freie Universität Berlin, with a focus on international (criminal) law, and is fluent in English, French and German.

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