



“uprooting to break the need for social deprivation”

The origin

Since 1982, Oikoten is working on alternatives for social exclusion of minor delinquents and seriously disadvantaged youngsters. More specifically, the initiators were moved by the situation of those minors for whom the traditional institutions didn't seem to offer a solution (anymore). Extensive institutionalisation, maladjusted behaviour, criminality, little education, ... these are one by one indicators for a further career of failure.

In 1982, Oikoten organized a first hike for two minors and their guide. The two guys lived in a closed governmental institution for re-education. They walked from Vézelay (France) to Santiago de Compostela (Spain). The idea of hiking was inspired by the 'Caravans of the Last Chance' of the American organization Vision Quest.

For these two youngsters, this Oikoten hike really was the ultimate opportunity. If they would end their expedition successfully, they would be released by the juvenile court and, supported by friends and sympathizers, they would get a new chance to take their future into their own hands.

The idea seemed improbable: the safety-risk and the chances of escape were high, the boys were unpredictable, the guide was no professional, neither in hiking, nor in educating.

Nevertheless, the venture was a success. Against all expectations, the hikers reached their final destination after a 4 months trip of 2500 km, walking with all their material in their backpacks and sleeping in individual tents. Afterwards, both minors were able to re-integrate into society.

This first success formed the base for the foundation of Oikoten. The Greek name of the organization has a double meaning: 'away from home, away from your native country' and 'by your own force, by your own means'. The name refers directly to the hiking tours, which still form the backbone of the organization up to today.

The evolution of Oikoten

In 1987, a new convention with the government gave old ideas a chance of realisation:

- the hiking formula was made accessible for girls as well,
- Oikoten started individual working projects on (mostly organic) farms in the French Pyrenees.
- for first offenders Oikoten set up an experiment of mediation between minors and their victims. With the close help of the juvenile court and the public prosecutors, mediation can positively influence further intervention.

Over the years, Oikoten's offer of uprooting projects has expanded. Beside the trip from Belgium to Santiago, new routes were explored. Four groups, for example, left for Algeria in winter to end their hiking trip, via Central Spain, in Santiago as well. This hikes took place before the first Gulf War.

Since 1992, Oikoten has also organised hiking trips from Poland, Slovakia, Norway, Scotland and Spain towards Belgium. And in 1984 and 1992, a number of youngsters made a sailing trip on sea.

There were also several cycle trips, to or from South or East Europe.

A few times, we even accepted very specific proposals of some of our more experienced guides: 8 minors survived 4 months in India; 2 minors biked four months through West-Africa; 4 minors, together with their 2 guides, formed a travelling circus in France.

For some individuals, a stay within a family was preferred to a trip: this gave us the necessary experience with work addresses and host families in France, Scotland and Portugal.

Since 1994, an Oikoten employee is working in the French Pyrenees to select and counsel families on the spot.

Oikoten continues to implement the idea of uprooting into other sectors. Nowadays we cooperate with juvenile psychiatry. Since 1998, minor psychiatric patients can participate in our long term projects.

The next year Oikoten started a new offer towards private institutions for child care. Some youngsters need a time out when their stay gets very problematic. In such cases, minors can be taken (individually) for an eight days hike in the French speaking part of Belgium.

Round up:

Every year, 16 youngsters can participate in a 3 or 4 months project abroad.

Since the start in 1982, over 300 minors followed a long term uprooting project and about 50 a short one. Mediation has become a current practice for hundreds of juvenile delinquents in every district of Flanders.

Although Oikoten has been through a great evolution over the last years, the ideas behind the very first trip have always been maintained, even in the mediation project. You could describe it as creating a hiding place, with restricted limits in time and place, where youngsters get the possibility to practice in taking responsibility for themselves and learn to take their future in their own hands.

Uprooting

The Oikoten clients all have lived a turbulent childhood. They have seldom or never achieved anything, they look upon themselves as lifelong losers, delinquents, untrustworthy, lazy, aggressive,...

From this viewpoint, the minor looks towards his future: no work, I can forget about a family, nobody wants to have anything to do with me, it's no use to continue studying, because I'll never bring that to a good end anyway. The only

possibility that remains is to walk back and forth from depression to aggression and often drug abuse.

Depression: I'm desperate; I don't get or even look for a job; I don't need a steady partner because it doesn't last; in short: leave me alone!

Aggression: I take what I can't buy; I don't let anyone push me, I'll get him first; they don't like me? So what, I don't need them; nobody trusts me? I don't trust anyone!

Interpersonal exchanges can only happen 'in conflict': verbal and sometimes physical violence makes them unmanageable and untreatable in the eyes of many. Their relations are all totally satiated: relations with their parents, at school, in the institutions.

Uprooting means that we temporarily and radically take our minors out of their surroundings. We challenge them to take on a role with totally different social expectations (for example: the pilgrim to Santiago versus the incorrigible delinquent).

We support the hypothesis that the minor, by actually taking up this role, will come to another definition of himself: apparently, I can be something else than what I thought I was or what I thought I had to be.

This does not only provide a new image in his own self-awareness but is also confirmed by the changed way the others look at him during and after the project.

Uprooting is a directed transfer of the minor to a radically different place **in** society. We don't want the minor to end playing one role and to take up another one. We rather hope that he would transcend both and reach a personal synthesis.

By participating in an uprooting project, the minor is able to show his efforts. And, communication with his surrounding systems at home is made possible again, although this may seem paradoxical because of this temporary stay abroad.

It is more and more accepted that this communication is a condition sine qua non to participate and to integrate into society.

Most minors experience their participation as a chance to prove something, as a possible way out, and therefore not as a sanction or an alternative sanction, but rather as an alternative for a sanction.

The active factors of uprooting

NATURE

Walking or living in the open nature gives opportunities to find real calm or serenity, fairly unknown to our youngster.

It brings new experiences of beauty, of being very small, but also of feeling very big when you conquer a large obstacle.

THE ROUTE AND THE RHYTHM

To reach the goal of their project, they have to make great efforts, every day.

The rhythm or even the routine of walking or working makes all of them think about themselves, their past and their future, willing or not.

THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM

The participants experience lots of freedom in their project, in contrast with their stay in institutions. Several hours a day, they can go and do whatever they want, but every day they have to fulfil what they have to do (walking or working).

Every day they have to decide either to go on or to stop.

They have the freedom to commit stupidities, or they can choose not to do it.

We hear from them all that this is a constant fight in their head.

PERSONAL SUPPORTERS

Every project is followed by a group of supporters, consisting of an Oikoten employee and a personal supporter for every participant (youngster and guide), chosen by themselves.

This group receives the letters from the guide, visits the participants once or twice, keeps in contact with parents and judges, prepares the house coming of the youngsters.

THE OFFER OF THE GUIDES AND THE HOST FAMILIES

It is clear that we ask very much of these persons. The guides sort of give away 3 or 4 months of their life, the host families share everything they have with some stranger.

The dedication we ask is enormous: we expect them to lead the youngsters but not to much. We want the youngsters to have maximum chances to experiment, but we need guides who draw a line if necessary.

We expect them to create a climate in which personal affairs can be talked about. This becomes possible because guides and families live the same life as the minors, together they work hard to reach a common goal. Solidarity grows during the project.

Oikoten recruits guides and families that are not specialised in going about with disadvantaged or delinquent minors. A certificate does not guarantee that you can handle this projects and youngsters. To guide them is not a job but a dedication, 24 hours a day during several months. It affects you as a person.

During the project, youngsters meet a lot of people who react very positively. Often, they offer them things for free, unexpected. This can be encouragements, applause but also a drink, a shower, a place to sleep. It confuses our tough guys and dolls and their portrayal of mankind.

On the Camino they meet lots of other pilgrims, all with their own story, their own motivation, with lots of admiration for our youngsters.

THE PREPARATION

Most of our clients come from closed institutions, extremely structured settings. By holding the youngsters and their guide in our centre in Tildonk for 6 or 10 days before the real start of their project, we try to build a clear minimum structure.

They have to walk every day an increasing amount of kilometres as a physical training. We have several meetings with the participants to talk about feelings, institutions, delinquency, drugs, etc . We explain the few rules and the philosophy of Oikoten, the lack of punishment, the arrangements to be made by themselves during the hike.

Parents and supporters are invited several times during the preparation, to get to know one another, to sign the contract and to say goodbye.

THE CONTRACT

The basis for each uprooting project is the agreement between the minor, his family, his supporters, the Juvenile Court or Childcare, his guide or host family, and Oikoten. Working with a contract emphasizes that the youngsters are taken seriously and considered a worthy party.

The youngsters have a good reason to start a project. They want to reach a certain goal with it: to leave the world of the institutions, to get back to their parents or to go and live independent.

By the Oikoten project, all of them want to prove to themselves and to the others that they deserve to be trusted, that they are worth something, that they are able to take on their own responsibility...The contract assures that the project will contribute to all of this.

For most minors, the accomplishment of the Oikoten project means the definite end of their stay in institutions.

The consequences of not fulfilling the agreements are also taken into account, for the youngster but also for the Oikoten staff members.

In the contract, all the "parties" have the chance to formulate extensively their views, concerns, and commitments in their own words. The contract includes the standard commitments of Oikoten, the guide, the minor and even the judge.

Concerning the youngsters who go for the hike, they agree with 4 "Oikoten rules":

1. to walk every inch by foot
2. to respect the law
3. to leave behind personal stereo and GSM
4. to avoid behaviour that endangers the hike.

We don't aim to reach a consensus in defining or solving the problem. The experience of "difference" and of the fact that the social worker or the Juvenile Court does not use their authority to put an end to this difference, is identity-building and reassuring for the minor.

The contract "works" if the parties involved can identify with it, if a binding description of the problem is reached, and if a number of arrangements come about.

The evening before the departure, all parties are invited by Oikoten to sign this contract, together with the minor. This signing of the contract is usually a somewhat official and often very emotional moment.

The Effect Of An Oikoten Project

In 1992, we carried out a study, based on 44 standardized interviews of male participants, to probe the influence of joining an Oikoten-project on the life of the minors afterwards. Two years later, we did the same for about 20 female participants.

We were mainly interested in finding out to what extent our projects could contribute to helping the minors integrate into society later on.

The results of this study show that about 60% of the participants was able to integrate well to very well afterwards. For the remaining 40%, the integration remained very difficult for many years.

Taken into account the very negative prospects before the Oikoten project started, the results invite for some optimism.

Of course, it is very hard to point out a causal connection with the Oikoten project itself. The interviewed participants, however, have no problem making this connection for themselves.

Even many years after their Oikoten hike, their testimony remains overwhelmingly positive. This also goes for those who still have difficulties up to today.

We quote:

"The minors generally look back overwhelmingly positive upon their trip. They then mainly talk about the contact with nature, the adventurous character of the trip, the magnitude of the physical performance, and, to a lesser degree, the friendship within the group.

The most important trip effect must be seen on the level of the self-image of the minor. For these minors, the disbelief in oneself and the disapproval of oneself was often extremely high before the trip. Most of the hikers have started to look at themselves differently during the trip. At the end of the trip, they feel excellent, not only psychologically but also physically. Because of the trip, they

have come to believe that they are able to achieve something, if they only persevere.

This opens up new perspectives and encourages them to take up more responsibilities in ordinary life.

They lose some of their bitterness and aggression. They have confidence in themselves and they have ambitions again, they want something better for themselves.

They talk about the positive influence of the trip on their way of living, on their work, on their leisure activities, and on their contacts with the law. Through the trip, they win pride and the respect of their parents, family, and friends.

Through the trip, the participants gain relational skills: they learn to show their feelings, they become more open, and they regain trust in others. On the other hand, they become more assertive, more selective in starting new contacts, which makes them consciously break with their old ties.

During the trip, they also learn some practical skills: to cook healthy food, to do the dishes, to go shopping, to manage their money,..."

(...)

Apart from all these positive effects, the minors themselves report very few negative ones. We think the most important negative effect is the following: when the experience of the trip cannot be translated into daily life, some hikers only end up a kind of nostalgia for the trip, with a longing for adventure, which can render the integration into society more difficult instead of easier.

The participants : criteria and evolution

THE OIKOTEN CRITERIA

1. age: minimum 16 years
2. motivation: They have to write a letter to apply for a hike or a working project. We talk to them and find out if they regard the project as a chance, as a challenge.
3. physical condition: if necessary, we ask for a medical examination.
4. no perspective: the project cannot interfere with existing or possible alternatives. Or in a positive way: the project must create new perspectives!
5. balance in the composition of the group: every year we organise 8 individual projects and 4 hikes with 2 boys and 1 guide. In these “groups” we try to avoid that they intensify the problems of each other.

COUNTER-INDICATIONS

1. acute drug abuse
2. acute psychiatric problems
3. a clear mental handicap.

We are aware that our guides and host families have their limits, concerning capacity and strength.

EVOLUTION

During the first 7 years the boys were 17 to 20 years old. (Adulthood was on 21).

Almost all of them committed criminal acts, most of them theft or housebreaking (65%), some drug abuse (15%) and violence (10%).

They were all well known for running away from many institutions.

Most of them came in contact with youth custody after the age of 12.

90% came to Oikoten from a closed Governmental Institution.

Nowadays, our clients are 16 or 17 years old. (Adulthood on 18).

Most of them were put in an institution before the age of 10.

Lots of them committed criminal acts, but there's an evolution: N° 1 is drug abuse (60%) , N° 2 acts against properties (40%) and N° 3 is violence against persons (25%). Still 80% of our clients come from Governmental Institutions.

Today, 75% of our clients have serious psychological problems, often due to child neglect, maltreatment or even abuse. (20% went through sexual abuse!) 40% was treated in a psychiatric clinic, 25% in a psycho-medical institution, 22% was in a drug rehabilitation centre.

Running away is still one of the problems (33%), but aggression has become more important (50%).

One could conclude that our population evolves from pre-adult delinquents to adolescents with serious drug and aggression problems.

No need to say that we have to interpret our criteria and counter-indications very widely and that it becomes more and more difficult to combine these youngsters into a group.

The Mediation-service District Louvain

End 1995, these three projects, viz. settlement, recovery mediation, and the new 'damage regulation', were placed under a cooperation of seven partners: the office of public prosecutors, the police, the state police, the city council of Louvain, the Catholic University of Louvain, and Oikoten and Judicial Welfare Louvain (both 'Non For Profit Organizations').

The City of Louvain functions as the factual employer, whereas the actual employer is performed by a steering committee in which each of the partners of the cooperation are represented.

The idea of equal cooperation, where judicial authorities together with social workers and welfare facilities take up responsibilities in the social interaction with (juvenile) criminality, opens very fascinating perspectives.

The fact that a few things have been given a place on a managerial level, gives the whole an official character and removes stereotypical polarity between social aid and justice. Finally, the importance of the academic input is not to be underestimated.

1. The mediation perpetrator (+parents) – victim by a neutral mediator. It is a process in the direction of reciprocal recognition and of collectively giving meaning to the facts and their consequences.

2. The effective settlement of the satisfaction of material and moral damage through (an as big as possible contribution of) the minor.
3. The settlementfund as an often necessary aid and as a denial of the apparent impossibility towards compensation.
4. The specific relation with the judicial framework, which, by giving the mandate towards settlement, fundamentally accepts the result, whatever that might be. Further in this text, we will throw more light on this relationship as a relationship of 'contra-independence'.

The Practice

In practice, this new settlement concept seemed to have success.

A protocol was negotiated with the office of the public prosecutors of Louvain: during a two week consultation period with the substitute of juvenile affairs, two mediators will be given access to juridical files in which minors have caused damage to a third party through an offence which they have confessed.

After the negotiations, the mediators get into contact with all the parties involved: the minors, the parents, the victims. The mediation is thus started.

The mediation is offered to the different parties as a possibility to influence the judicial decision, without however giving any guarantees in advance.

Over the last years, the settlement project was made use of in a few hundred files within the district of Louvain. In most of the cases, a total or partial settlement between parties was achieved. Dozens of times, the settlementfund was made use of, the past years each time for a few hundred thousand francs.

The victims feel themselves heard, recognized and respected in their needs through the mediation: they have the feeling they are not only compensated materially (in itself , as a matter of fact, not always something that goes without saying). At the same time, they are also being asked how they think the minor can regain credibility for them and for society.

The minors find it very meaningful that they can finally do something themselves in this case. With regard to this aspect, they are often put under a lot of pressure by their own family.

The parents appreciate it that they are being involved in the way their child is being dealt with in the case.

Generally, they think it is right that their child has to take up its own responsibility via the settlement, so they do not feel so much as being the victim of the whole affaire. They also appreciate the possibility of preventing a sentence by the juvenile court through this way.

Sometimes, the settlement significantly restores and strengthens the ties with their child.

For the office of the public prosecutor, a successful settlement is usually a sufficient reason for dismissing the case. Rather exceptionally, a summons is issued in the settlementfiles.

Settlement-in-itself offers no sufficient alternative for the approach of marginal, needy, or delinquent minors. Until now, the project had the best results for the ordinary adolescent who has violated the social standards at a certain moment in his life in a more or less serious way. Here, the settlement process can really lead to the recovery of mutual relations.

In more problematic situations, the settlement can only be a corrective measure.

The major merit of the project is that it mobilizes the minor and his surroundings to a collective, problem solving initiative and that the office of the public prosecutor, as the authorized judicial instance, opens its mind to the result of this.

The mediation, as applied in the settlement project, is in a phase where the office of the public prosecutor considers the opportunity of pressure. The office of the public prosecutor wishes in principle to make as less use as possible of the social pressure (principle of subsidiary) and draw as much as possible on the own settlement capacity of the parties.

For this purpose, a mandate is given to the mediator to verify with all the parties involved (victim, minor, and parents) to which extend the judicial definition really does justice to what has happened.

It is of vital importance that this is not a manoeuvre of the office of public prosecutor towards the 'accused'. It is rather a practice of 'methodical doubt' by the office of public prosecutor with regard to all the parties involved, to this inspired by a positive presupposition: the parties are able to reach a better mutual understanding and pacification among themselves than could have been expected from looking at the judicial file.

Through the mandate as mediation, the office of public prosecutor in principle opens its mind to the results of it and is willing to take this result as one of the many factors into account when exercising his jurisdiction.