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COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARD THE EMPLOYMENT OF EX-PRISONERS IN IRINGA DISTRICT COUNCIL, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined community attitudes toward supporting the employment of ex-prisoners in Iringa District Council, Tanzania. A mixed-methods approach with a cross-sectional research design was used. Quantitative data were collected from 92 respondents through structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained from 10 key informants through semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings showed that community attitudes toward the employment of ex-prisoners were generally favourable. About 78.3% of respondents were willing to offer employment opportunities to ex-prisoners, 62.6% had supported or considered employing an ex-prisoner and 74.7% were willing to recommend an ex-prisoner for employment. However, only 40.0% reported that local leaders encouraged the employment of ex-prisoners, while 62.0% reported witnessing community members discouraging such employment. Qualitative findings further indicated that concerns about criminal records, trustworthiness, fear of reoffending and limited leadership involvement could hinder access to employment. A paired-samples analysis also showed a significant difference between willingness to support employment and reported employment-related behaviour, $t(90) = 3.74, p < .001$. Guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the study concludes that although community attitudes provide a favourable basis for employment-based reintegration, stronger leadership involvement, community sensitization, employer engagement and employment facilitation are needed to translate positive attitudes into actual employment opportunities for ex-prisoners.

KEYWORDS: Community attitudes; employment; ex-prisoners; economic reintegration; stigma; Theory of Planned Behaviour; Iringa District Council.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Economic reintegration is an important part of the transition from prison to community life. For individuals who have completed their prison sentences, access to employment can provide a reliable source of income, promote self-reliance, restore social relationships and create a sense of purpose in everyday life. Employment may also reduce economic vulnerability and help former prisoners establish more stable relationships with their families and communities. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018) recognises social reintegration and post-release support as important elements in reducing the likelihood of reoffending and promoting successful adjustment after imprisonment. From this perspective, employment is not only an economic opportunity but also an important pathway through which ex-prisoners can rebuild their lives and participate positively in their communities.

Despite the importance of employment, securing a job after release from prison can be difficult. Having a criminal record may affect how potential employers assess an individual, even when the person has the necessary skills and is willing to work. Pager (2003) demonstrated that a criminal record can significantly reduce employment opportunities, showing that the consequences of imprisonment may continue even after an individual has completed a sentence. In addition to formal employment barriers, ex-prisoners may encounter social stigma, concerns about trustworthiness and uncertainty among employers regarding their previous offences. These concerns can influence recruitment decisions and limit opportunities for stable employment (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; Anazodo et al., 2019). Consequently, successful reintegration may depend not only on the skills and motivation of ex-prisoners but also on whether communities and employers are willing to give them opportunities to participate in economic activities.

The employment reintegration of ex-prisoners is also influenced by the social relationships and networks available to them after release. Visser et al. (2011) found that previous work experience, connections with employers and supportive family relationships were associated with improved employment outcomes among people returning from prison. This indicates that employment after imprisonment should not be viewed solely as an individual responsibility. Community members, employers, local leaders and family networks can either create opportunities or reinforce barriers that affect the ability of ex-prisoners to obtain work.

Where community members are willing to recommend former prisoners, provide information about available employment and accept them in workplaces, the process of economic reintegration may become easier. Conversely, fear, mistrust and negative perceptions may restrict access to employment even when suitable opportunities exist.

The issue is particularly relevant in Tanzania, where community relationships and informal economic networks play an important role in people's access to livelihoods. Evidence from Iringa Municipality indicates that ex-prisoners may experience discrimination, social rejection and difficulties in gaining acceptance within their communities (Benard et al., 2023). Such experiences demonstrate that the social environment surrounding an ex-prisoner can influence the opportunities available after release. A community that recognises rehabilitation and is willing to provide opportunities may contribute to successful reintegration, while negative perceptions may make it difficult for former prisoners to regain their economic independence. However, evidence specifically addressing how community members perceive the employment of ex-prisoners in Iringa District Council remains limited. Understanding community attitudes is therefore important because willingness to employ an ex-prisoner does not necessarily mean that employment opportunities will actually be provided. Community members may express support for the employment of former prisoners while still having concerns about trust, the possibility of reoffending or the suitability of particular individuals for specific jobs. Local leadership can also influence these attitudes by encouraging acceptance and supporting reintegration initiatives. Similarly, previous interaction with ex-prisoners and awareness of rehabilitation efforts may shape how community members respond to their employment.

Against this background, the present article focuses specifically on the first objective of the study, which is to examine community attitudes toward the employment of ex-prisoners in Iringa District Council. The article examines community members' willingness to provide employment opportunities to ex-prisoners, their willingness to recommend ex-prisoners for employment, their actual experience of supporting or considering ex-prisoners for employment, the extent to which local leaders encourage such employment and the presence of community discouragement toward employing former prisoners. Focusing on these dimensions provides a clearer understanding of whether community attitudes in Iringa District Council create opportunities for or barriers to the employment-based economic reintegration of ex-prisoners.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Literature Review: Theory of Planned Behavior

This study was guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), which explains how attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control influence behavioural intentions and actual behaviour. In this study, attitude refers to community members' willingness to offer or recommend employment to ex-prisoners, while subjective norms relate to the influence of local leaders and other community members on employment decisions. Perceived behavioural control concerns whether community members have the opportunity and practical capacity to provide employment. The theory is relevant because positive attitudes do not always result in actual support; for example, 78.3% of respondents were willing to offer employment opportunities to ex-prisoners, compared with 62.6% who had supported or considered employing an ex-prisoner, while only 40.0% reported that local leaders encouraged such employment. Thus, TPB provides a useful framework for understanding both community willingness and the practical and social factors that influence employment support for ex-prisoners in Iringa District Council.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Previous studies show that community and employer attitudes play an important role in determining whether ex-prisoners obtain employment after release. In Ghana, Wiafe (2021) found that although some small and medium enterprise owners were willing to consider employing ex-convicts, actual employment decisions were influenced by concerns about trust, the nature of previous offences and the availability of character references. Similarly, Gana et al. (2021) found that employer willingness to hire ex-offenders increased when information about rehabilitation was available and when employers received support or encouragement from community and religious leaders. In South Africa, Chikadzi et al. (2022) reported that although employment can contribute to successful reintegration and reduce the likelihood of reoffending, access to formal employment remained limited because of employer reluctance and inadequate reintegration support.

Evidence from East Africa also indicates that willingness to employ ex-prisoners does not always translate into actual employment opportunities. Mugenyi (2022) found that community members could be willing to offer employment, but concerns about trust and possible reoffending continued to limit employment opportunities. The study further showed that direct communication, familiarity with ex-prisoners and community sensitization were associated with greater acceptance. Okello (2020) similarly found that attitudes toward employing ex-prisoners varied across community groups and that previous exposure to

rehabilitation programmes, recommendations from social networks and active support from local leaders could improve their chances of being considered for employment. Mwalukasa and Sallwa (2021) also observed that community members were generally more comfortable supporting ex-prisoners in casual labour and small-scale economic activities than in formal employment, partly because of concerns about skills and previous criminal behaviour.

The Tanzanian context provides further evidence that social acceptance and trust remain important in the reintegration of ex-prisoners. Benard et al. (2023), in their study in Iringa Municipality, reported that ex-prisoners experienced discrimination, social rejection, isolation, lack of acceptance and lack of trust during reintegration. These experiences suggest that negative community perceptions may restrict opportunities for former prisoners even when they are willing and able to work. At the same time, the findings from previous studies indicate that familiarity, mentorship, community sensitization and leadership support may create a more favourable environment for employment.

Despite these findings, limited empirical evidence specifically examines community attitudes toward supporting the employment of ex-prisoners in Iringa District Council. The existing studies largely focus on employer reluctance, social stigma, trust and broader reintegration experiences. The present study therefore addresses this gap by examining community willingness to offer employment, previous support or consideration of employing an ex-prisoner, perceived encouragement from local leaders and willingness to recommend an ex-prisoner for employment. This focus provides a context-specific understanding of the extent to which favourable community attitudes can support employment-based economic reintegration in Iringa District Council.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach and a cross-sectional research design and was conducted in Iringa District Council, Tanzania. The target population comprised local leaders, members of community-based organizations, household members of ex-prisoners and residents who interacted with ex-prisoners. The accessible population was estimated at 120 individuals. A total of 92 respondents participated in the quantitative component, while 10 key informants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews. Quantitative respondents were selected through simple random sampling, whereas key informants were purposively selected based on their knowledge of community reintegration and employment issues. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. For the first objective, the questionnaire focused on four indicators: willingness to offer

employment to ex-prisoners, previous support or consideration of employing an ex-prisoner, perceived encouragement from local leaders and willingness to recommend an ex-prisoner for employment. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages in SPSS Version 27, while qualitative data were analysed thematically to identify explanations related to community attitudes, stigma, leadership involvement and employment barriers. The mixed-methods approach enabled the study to assess the level of community support and, at the same time, explain factors influencing the translation of positive attitudes into employment opportunities for ex-prisoners.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Community Attitudes toward Supporting Employment of Ex-Prisoners

The first objective examined community attitudes toward supporting the employment of ex-prisoners in Iringa District Council. The findings were based on responses from 92 questionnaire participants. Four indicators were used to assess willingness to support employment, previous employment-related support, perceived encouragement from local leaders and willingness to recommend ex-prisoners for employment. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Community Attitudes toward Employment Support of Ex-Prisoners. (n = 92)

Statement	Yes (f)	Yes (%)	No (f)	No (%)
Willing to offer employment opportunities to an ex-prisoner	72	78.3	20	21.7
Ever supported or considered employing an ex-prisoner	57	62.6	34	37.4
Local leaders encourage employment of ex-prisoners	36	40.0	54	60.0
Willing to recommend an ex-prisoner for a job opportunity	68	74.7	23	25.3

Source: Field Data (2026).

The findings indicate that community attitudes toward supporting the employment of ex-prisoners were generally favourable. Most respondents, 72 (78.3%), reported that they were willing to offer employment opportunities to an ex-prisoner, while 20 (21.7%) were not willing. This was the strongest direct indicator of individual willingness to support employment. The finding suggests that a substantial proportion of community members were prepared to consider employment as one way of helping ex-prisoners rebuild their livelihoods and become economically independent.

The qualitative findings supported this result. A local leader explained that when someone returns from prison, giving the person an opportunity to work is important for starting a new life and that community leaders can assist by communicating with employers and encouraging them to give former prisoners another opportunity. This perspective shows that employment was viewed not only as a source of income but also as a practical means of supporting reintegration.

The finding is consistent with previous studies which identify employment as an important component of successful reintegration after imprisonment. Visher et al. (2011) found that previous work experience, connections with employers and social relationships can influence employment outcomes after release. However, the relatively favourable attitude observed in the present study does not necessarily mean that ex-prisoners have equal access to actual employment opportunities. Concerns related to criminal records, trust and the availability of employment opportunities may continue to affect actual hiring decisions.

The second indicator showed that 57 respondents (62.6%) had previously supported or considered employing an ex-prisoner, while 34 (37.4%) had not. Although this proportion was lower than the 78.3% who expressed willingness to offer employment, it still indicates that a considerable proportion of respondents had some practical experience of, or had considered, supporting an ex-prisoner through employment.

The difference between willingness and previous support is important because it suggests that positive attitudes may not always be translated into practical action. The corrected dissertation identifies several possible explanations, including limited employment opportunities, the nature of respondents' occupations or businesses, lack of information about ex-prisoners seeking employment and uncertainty about how to facilitate employment. This finding is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which recognizes that favourable attitudes do not automatically lead to behaviour when practical opportunities and perceived behavioural control are limited.

The third indicator showed a weaker level of perceived leadership support. Only 36 respondents (40.0%) reported that local leaders encouraged the employment of ex-prisoners, whereas 54 (60.0%) reported that they did not. This finding points to a gap between individual willingness and perceived institutional or leadership support. Local leaders can play an important role in encouraging social acceptance, connecting ex-prisoners with available opportunities and influencing community expectations regarding reintegration.

The relatively low level of perceived leadership encouragement may therefore limit the translation of favourable individual attitudes into more coordinated employment

opportunities. From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, leadership support forms part of the social environment within which individuals make decisions. When local leaders openly support the employment of ex-prisoners, they may help reduce negative perceptions and encourage employers and other community members to participate in reintegration efforts.

The fourth indicator showed that 68 respondents (74.7%) were willing to recommend an ex-prisoner for a job opportunity, compared with 23 (25.3%) who were not willing. This represents another strong indication of favourable community attitudes toward employment-based reintegration. Willingness to recommend is important because personal referrals and social networks can help connect ex-prisoners with potential employers. The finding is consistent with Visser et al. (2011), who emphasized the importance of employment connections and social relationships in improving post-release employment outcomes.

However, the qualitative evidence also revealed continuing concerns about criminal records and employer trust. One community representative explained that some employers remain fearful of employing a person because of their past, even when that person has changed and possesses useful skills. This concern is consistent with previous research showing that criminal records can create stigma and reduce employment opportunities (Pager, 2003; Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016). The finding suggests that positive attitudes toward employment may coexist with hesitation when actual employment decisions are being made.

The wider community environment also presents an important challenge. The study found that 62.0% of respondents reported that community members had discouraged the employment of ex-prisoners. This creates an important contrast with the generally positive individual attitudes reported above. A person may personally be willing to employ or recommend an ex-prisoner while still being influenced by negative views expressed by neighbours, family members, employers or other community members.

This finding is consistent with Benard et al. (2023), who documented experiences of discrimination, isolation, lack of acceptance and lack of trust among ex-prisoners in Iringa Municipality. It also corresponds with the wider literature showing that stigma associated with a criminal record can affect employment experiences after imprisonment. The findings therefore suggest that improving employment reintegration requires attention not only to individual willingness but also to the wider social environment in which employment decisions are made.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that community attitudes toward supporting the employment of ex-prisoners in Iringa District Council were generally favourable. The highest proportion of positive responses was recorded for willingness to offer employment (78.3%), followed by willingness to recommend an ex-prisoner for employment (74.7%) and previous support or consideration of employing an ex-prisoner (62.6%). In contrast, only 40.0% reported that local leaders encouraged the employment of ex-prisoners. The findings therefore point to a clear difference between favourable individual attitudes and the level of practical and institutional support available to translate those attitudes into employment opportunities. The paired-samples analysis in the corrected dissertation further confirmed a statistically significant gap between employment willingness and reported behaviour, $t(90) = 3.74, p < .001$.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The study concludes that community attitudes toward supporting the employment of ex-prisoners in Iringa District Council were generally favourable. Most respondents were willing to offer employment opportunities and recommend ex-prisoners for jobs, while a substantial proportion had previously supported or considered employing an ex-prisoner. These findings indicate that positive community attitudes provide an important basis for employment-based economic reintegration.

However, the findings also reveal a gap between individual willingness and the wider social and institutional environment. Only 40.0% of respondents reported that local leaders encouraged the employment of ex-prisoners, while 62.0% reported witnessing community members discouraging such employment. Concerns about trust, criminal records and negative community perceptions may therefore continue to limit the translation of favourable attitudes into actual employment opportunities. Consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the findings demonstrate that employment support is influenced not only by individual attitudes but also by social norms and the practical conditions that enable supportive behaviour.

6.0 Recommendations

First, Iringa District Council, together with ward and village leaders, should strengthen community sensitization programmes on rehabilitation, behavioural change and the productive contribution of ex-prisoners to families and communities. Such programmes should also address stereotypes and fears associated with previous imprisonment.

Second, local leaders should play a more active role in facilitating employment opportunities by engaging employers, community-based organizations and other relevant stakeholders. Their involvement can help create a supportive environment for the employment reintegration of ex-prisoners.

Third, mechanisms should be established to link ex-prisoners with employers and available employment opportunities. Community-based organizations can contribute through mentorship, skills development, referrals and follow-up support.

Fourth, employers and community members should be encouraged to consider ex-prisoners based on their current skills, qualifications, work behaviour and evidence of rehabilitation rather than relying only on their previous criminal records. This may help reduce employment stigma and improve access to work.

Finally, future studies should examine whether favourable community attitudes lead to actual employment outcomes over time. Longitudinal research could assess employment acquisition and retention, employer attitudes and changes in community perceptions following the release of ex-prisoners.

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