



**PRISON
DIALOGUE**

THRESHOLD DIALOGUE

A PROPOSAL

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Threshold Dialogue is based on Prison Dialogue's two-year partnership with Cambridge Probation Service, and on a four-year trial in Dorset funded by the Dorset Criminal Justice Board, Bournemouth Crime Reduction Partnership, Bournemouth Safer and Stronger Communities Team, the Mulberry Trust, the Tudor Trust and the John Paul Getty Trust. Prison Dialogue worked with a wide range of agencies to develop a Threshold Dialogue system in three prisons (HMP Dorchester, HMP Guys Marsh and HMYOI Portland) and three community venues in Dorset, which has been running since 2006. Partners in Dorset Threshold are Dorset Police, HMPS, Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset Probation Trust, BCHA, CRI, Many other agencies and individuals who participate in Threshold Dialogue every week.

THRESHOLD DIALOGUE – A PROPOSAL

THE PROBLEM

- ✚ The disturbingly high rate of recidivism amongst short-term offenders is straining the overloaded prison population in the UK. 'In 2006, 61,000 adults were sentenced to terms of imprisonment of less than 12 months. On average they had 16 previous convictions.' - Audit Commission Report into short-sentenced prisoners. In 2007 HMP Dorchester had a reconviction rate of 74.7%, the worst prison in England and Wales at the time that Threshold Dialogue was just getting started there.
- ✚ Short-sentenced prisoners have persistent problems but because of the briefness of their stay in prison little is done there to address their offending behaviour or to understand their issues, and there is no provision of support from Probation after release. 'Around 60 per cent are convicted of at least one offence in the year after release.' – Audit Commission Report.
- ✚ Many prison staff, police officers and others do recognise this: *"As someone coming from 15 years in the job, I know lads in here that we see all the time. You don't often get a chance to think about the real issues that keep folks coming back time and time again. If we just lock people up we're missing the point."* – Prison Officer.
- ✚ Many offenders are not self-motivated, lack understanding of how to take essential next steps, have little or no relationship with those who can help and often lack the self-confidence to keep going when things go wrong. *"I had a relapse a few weeks ago. I had nobody I could turn to. I don't know how to put myself across to social workers because they're all going to think I'm low-life"* – High-repeat Offender.
- ✚ The statutory and other agencies that are charged with reducing recidivism, tend, unfortunately, not to solicit or hear feedback from offenders. 'Chance encounters aside, prison staff usually only find out about a released offender when they arrive back in custody. As well as being demoralising for staff, this makes it impossible to evaluate the effectiveness of what is done' – Audit Commission Report into Short-sentenced Prisoners. *"Just because our customers are criminals, maybe, we don't necessarily always listen to what they've got to say."* – Safer and Stronger Communities Team.
- ✚ Agencies are largely driven by their own targets, budget constraints and habitual ways of working. In significant areas this results in a fragmented system, with service gaps and inefficiencies, and the offenders encountering a dehumanising bureaucracy. *"I think there's a misconception that various different agencies actually communicate with one another"* – Police Officer. *"When I first came out of prison it seemed like I was bouncing between different agencies, it didn't seem like they were talking to each other and it was frustrating because I didn't understand how the process worked."* – Ex-offender.
- ✚ Over and beyond reducing the rate of re-offending, the real aim must be the resettlement of ex-offenders back into the community as responsible citizens. For this to occur, the community needs to participate and understand how to engage with ex-offenders. At present, the communities expect professionals in the criminal justice system to deal with the problem and keep offenders away from them. They have no recognition of their own role in resettlement: *"These people, they're offenders, yes, but they're not aliens, they're not a separate species, and they come back into our community and live here. If they're going to move on they need to feel that they've got some relationship with that community that doesn't involve criminality."* – Manager of Bournemouth Safer and Stronger Communities Team.
- ✚ New ways of thinking and working together are urgently required, yet central and local government funds are subject to recession and budgets everywhere are being squeezed. *"Police budgets will be cut by 16% over four years, councils will face cuts of 71% a year, and the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice will see their budgets cut by 6% a year"* – Chancellor George Osborne (The Guardian 20th Oct '11)

THE PROPOSAL

Threshold Dialogue is an innovative response to the problem of high-repeat offending that has been piloted in Dorset over a 3 year period with promising results. It has taken many agencies that do good work, but separately, and has combined them in a sequence of weekly dialogue forums where the offender's journey to resettlement is the primary consideration. There is a high rate of relapse and recidivism, so in order to engage offenders wherever they are at any time, dialogue groups have been established in the three prisons in the county as well as in several community locations into which the offenders are released. Pairs of trained agency workers (i.e. prison, police, probation, court, drug, health, accommodation and council officers) facilitate these large-group dialogues, which take the form of on-the-level conversations about what offenders and ex-offenders need in order to reduce their re-offending and resettle in the community.

The success of offenders' individual resettlement journeys depends on 1) access to practical information about next steps (which can be provided by those who specialise in each field), 2) changes to thinking, attitude and behaviour (which can be worked on in relationship with others) and 3) a shift of self-worth, motivation and will-power (which can only be developed by the offender him or herself). The dialogues also are also consultation forums that provide first-hand feedback to agencies on the impact and effectiveness of their services.

The first threshold is the prison gate and there is a 'crisis of entry' for the offender stepping over that threshold into prison and 'a crisis of release' on departing from prison. A succession of further thresholds have to be crossed on a journey of resettlement in relation to possible drug and alcohol addictions, housing, employment, health and relationships. Once successfully across all the thresholds, the ex-offender is no longer dependent on state (public) support but is resettled and a contributor to society.

There are seven features of Threshold Dialogue that are central to its success:

- ✚ **Engagement through Dialogue:** The regular large-group dialogues that are held weekly in the prison and in the community anchor offenders (and ex-offenders) in a real conversation about their needs and opportunities, and what matters to them. *"The people who are coming in are often amazed by the rapport they get going with some of the service users. People obviously have their stereotypes and when the barriers are dropped and people are genuinely engaging on the level that everyone's comfortable at, I think the flow of information is a lot better; it's heard and it's received. That information's been there previously but they've not been able to get hold of it, so obviously the environment the dialogue creates is conducive to getting information."* – Housing (BCHA) / Prison Liaison Worker.
- ✚ **Working with, not doing to:** The dialogues serve to humanise the system by creating the kind of environment and impersonal relationships where people work with each other rather than trying to do things to each other. Without this, the system can be very transactional or mechanistic and the human being at the heart of it is often missed, thereby reducing the effectiveness of services. *"You get it from other agencies. They've got a text-book they've got to work from. In dialogue it's different. You end up chatting anyhow 'cus everyone's there for the same thing, and that's given me a lot of confidence."* – Offender. *"I think it is an opportunity for agencies to better understand what offenders are saying about the system and where they think changes could be made. But it's also about offenders and ex-offenders understanding what agencies are there to do and dispel some of those myths that build up, particularly in prisons, around what people can and can't do, or why certain decisions are made."* – Safer and Stronger Communities Team.
- ✚ **Motivation, Self-worth and Will Power:** The structure and nature of the dialogues enable offenders to generate and sustain their own motivation, sense of self-worth and will-power to change. Without that, the various service provisions can, at best, be only partially effective. It is the sustained personal will- power that

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creates the conditions to break the repetitive 'revolving door' experience of high-repeat short-term offenders. *"I've tried it before! Get a nice flat - not enough. Decent income, a good relationship and kids - not enough. You think those are going to be what keeps you clean, but it's still not enough. I'm hearing you talk about demons and I'm the same as you. Maybe it's time to realise that the real issues lie with me, not with all the other things."* – Offender

- ✚ **Focus on the Offender's Journey:** The focus of the conversations is the offender's journey, not the advocacy of solutions, the ticking of boxes or the meeting of agency targets. This journey is a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual journey in which people shift their identity from *offender* to *ex-offender*. It is inevitable that there will be relapses along the way. *"I came to the group before. It keeps you on the straight and narrow. When the group stopped it left a hole. Then I started getting into trouble with the police. When I heard the group was on again I said, 'Yeah....I'll be there:'"* – Offender (Probation client).
- ✚ **Line of Sight:** If you don't know where you are going, any road can take you there! So the dialogues give offenders access to a vision and a Line of Sight from where they are at any time (be it in or out of prison) to being settled and self-sufficient in the community, in whatever form they hold that aspiration. Just as importantly, in the dialogues participants can see and consider the immediate next steps they need to take on that journey. This is about people's lives working (resettlement), not just trying to be 'good' (reducing re-offending). *"Some of the biggest changes I've witnessed in people have been through people sitting in a room, talking to each other.... To effect a change in somebody's life, can sometimes be done just by spending a little bit of time... And sometimes the money can get in the way."* – Housing Options Manager, Bournemouth Borough Council.
- ✚ **Multi-agency partnership:** All service providers in the area and members of the local community are invited to work alongside offenders during their journey, including during periods of relapse. In particular, to provide support and challenge to assumptions, attitudes, thinking and behaviour in relation to offenders' immediate next steps and the long-term vision they hold for their lives. Service providers also hear feedback about their services directly from the users. This starts to join up the gaps and challenge poor practice in the local service provision: *"Although my job says that I'm a housing options manager, in fact, I can't properly address the needs of that group of people unless I really take on board the benefits bit, the education bits, the training bits. So it's given me a whole broader horizon."* – Housing Options Manager at Bournemouth Borough Council. *"We talk about partnership working a lot, but I think actually what dialogue does is really strengthens some of those partnerships at various different levels – right from the people who are working on the ground, maybe managing offenders or ex-offenders on a day to day basis, in hostels, PCSOs, community workers, but also at a more strategic level: prison governors; superintendents from the police and community safety managers; probation managers; actually working together and understanding what the system looks like in their local area."* – Manager of Bournemouth Safer and Stronger Communities Team.
- ✚ **Sustainability:** Because of the many high-repeat short-term offenders involved in the dialogues, many of whom lead unstable lives and are present one week and absent the next, the sustainability of the dialogues is essential. In support of this, written reports are published on all dialogues. (See www.prisondialogue.org). The reports are a sequence of relevant quotes drawn from the dialogue itself. The trained officers who partner facilitating the dialogues are supported by an *Operations Group* of supervisory managers from the various agencies involved. They manage resourcing and determine practice issues based on feedback from the dialogues. Also they escalate policy issues for consideration by the *Governance Board* of partnership executives from the statutory agencies.

THE DIALOGUE

The target group for the Dorset Threshold Dialogue (DTD) was determined by the Governance Board as high repeat offenders (including PPOs) and especially those who serve sentences of less than 12 months. A network of three prisons and three community dialogue groups has been established. That may be increased in number to reach a larger percentage of this particular population. Other offender groupings could benefit from a Threshold Dialogue approach depending on local need – for example female offenders with children at risk, criminal families, rural areas suffering a surge of crime, specific council estates, ASBO recipients, and so on.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Participants in DTD include high-repeat offenders (including PPOs), whether in or out of prison, meeting with ex-offenders, officers and staff from all agencies for whom this has relevance to their 'day-job' (from prisons, police, probation, courts, council, housing, drug & alcohol, employment, health, education, etc). Community dialogues can expand to include members of the public to represent different aspects of the community and what might be called *normal* community life. Others may be invited to engage around a particular subject e.g. employers to talk about work, neighbours of a hostel to build local understanding and relationships, businesses affected by anti-social behaviour etc. Once established, Threshold Dialogue it is an ongoing, versatile and effective working partnership. *"We talk about partnership working a lot, but I think actually what dialogue does is really strengthens some of those partnerships at various different levels – right from the people who are working on the ground, maybe managing offenders or ex-offenders on a day to day basis, in hostels, PCSOs, community workers, but also at a more strategic level, prison governors, superintendents from the police and community safety managers, probation managers, actually working together and understanding what the system looks like in their local area."* – Manager of Bournemouth Safer and Stronger Communities Team. Offenders are referred from many sources: prison staff; offender supervisor; hostel key worker; drug counsellor; probation officer; friends and others in the prison or hostel etc. Participation is largely voluntary, although there may be an expectation placed on hostel residents to attend and it can be a required activity on a Probation licence. The dialogues are open groups and participants may vary from week to week.

THE SESSIONS

- ✚ Threshold Dialogue provides a regular series of on-the-level conversations between offenders, ex-offenders, agency officers and staff, members of the public and invited guests to address what is of most immediate concern to those in the room. *"As someone coming from 15 years in the job, I know lads in here that we see all the time. You don't often get a chance to think about the real issues that keep folks coming back time and time again. If we just lock people up we're missing the point."* – Prison Officer
- ✚ The sessions last for 1-2 hours, typically include 10-20 participants and are held weekly. People sit in a circle and hold one conversation, which is facilitated by a pair of trained staff using the Dialogic Practices: voice, listening, respect and suspension. The process is guided by the Line of Sight philosophy for resettlement.
- ✚ Participants learn how to be authentic and to listen to each other, and they develop impersonal relationships based on respect for each other's situation. *"Dialogue helps to break down stereotypical beliefs - e.g. between police and offenders - because when you talk to people in a situation like that you see their human side, whether you agree with their views or not."* – Police
- ✚ The spirit of the dialogues is for people to support and challenge one another, to stand in each others' shoes and to assume responsibility for their own emotions, actions, choices and direction in life. *"Other people*

highlighting your strengths gives you the confidence you need to move forward and change. Sometimes other people's feedback can be uncomfortable at first, but once you've processed it, it can help." – Ex-offender.

- ✚ The aim is for everybody to learn and nobody to teach. *"The reason that these groups work is that there are so many structures and so many rules out there - but there's knowledge here, it's about the real stuff, the stuff that doesn't get written down."* – Prison Officer.
- ✚ Unattributed quotes from the dialogues are often circulated to influence offenders, staff and the public beyond the group. *"(I can see that) group members regardless of role are contributing to the discussions and the constructive challenges are providing learning opportunities which are being shared outside of the group."* – Senior Manager, G4S

CROSSING THRESHOLDS (The network of dialogues)

The Dialogues aim to support the offender's journey from the prison cell to being resettled and a responsible member of the community. This is guided by a Line of Sight, which means that the destination is apparent, and wherever you are on that journey the next necessary steps can be thought-through and taken. There are thresholds to cross on this journey and there are emotional as well as material barriers. Fundamental to resettlement is the identity shift from the mind set of an offender to that of an ex-offender.

- ✚ The prison gates are the first significant threshold and passing through them upon release involves a crisis of release, or having re-offended, a crisis of entry. *"I got out of prison yesterday morning and I'm finding it difficult to adjust. I've been on a pub crawl today. I haven't had a chance to get used to being out – it's all a bit much at once, it's upsetting me and I feel alone. I'm sorry to say I'd like to go back to prison right now."* – Ex-offender. *"Lots of the myths were exploded for me when I started to go in and I took the time to sit down with the users of the service...to find out about not only what really did happen behind the walls, but to talk...about what their fears and hopes were as they come up to release."* – Housing Options Manager, B'mouth BC.
- ✚ Other thresholds, such as coming off drugs, starting a job, entering education, moving into independent accommodation etc, each have their own challenges, dilemmas and choices. *"Moving out of prison into the community isn't hard. The real challenge is moving from (drug) rehab world into the normal world."* – Offender.
- ✚ The dialogue sessions are run in prisons (the local prison, training prison and YOI), so that offenders have the best opportunity to attend throughout their sentence, and progressively into the community at different venues in support of their journey across these thresholds. In Dorset this tracks progress through different forms of housing (from direct access, to supported, to independent accommodation). The conversation is different in each dialogue as the needs and choices they face depend on the immediate thresholds to cross.
- ✚ In prison offenders can prepare, emotionally as well as practically, for release. *"I've been coming here for a few weeks, I've heard what other people have said and it's got me thinking that treatment might be the right option for me. I never would have considered it before. I've started the ball rolling with my Carats Worker."* – Offender. *"I'm looking forward to getting out on Thursday – Footprints are meeting me and I'm coming along to The Clubhouse for Threshold Dialogue next Tuesday – I'm bringing my sponsor along!"* – Offender.
- ✚ In a direct access hostel it is about accessing services, and being listened to. *"We had an individual (in the dialogue) who raised an issue with the local connection protocol. He can now access the hostel after being street homeless for 6 months and focus on the support he requires. The process of the dialogue has clearly shown how productive being heard can be."* – Support Worker, Direct Access Hostel.
- ✚ In supported accommodation the big challenges can be dealing with lapses on drugs, how to rebuild a useful life and the dilemma of gaining independence versus losing support.

OUTCOMES

- ✚ **Reduction in the Rate of Re-offending:** Dorset Threshold Dialogue has had insufficient numbers to show statistical evidence for this, although we do have some evidence on a case by case basis. *It's almost an inevitable cycle, once you're homeless and you've got an addiction, how are you going to feed that addiction and take care of yourself when you're on the streets apart from offending?...And by engaging with dialogue I think he was able to break that cycle this time.* – Antisocial Behaviour Coordinator.
- ✚ **Reduction in the Cost of Servicing Offenders:** *Some of the biggest changes I've witnessed in people, have been through people sitting in a room, talking to each other....To effect a change in somebody's life, can sometimes be done just by spending a little bit of time...And sometimes the money can get in the way.* – Housing Options Manager at Bournemouth Borough Council.
- ✚ **Line of Sight:** The offender holding a vision of where he wants to get to, clarity about the immediate next steps on that journey and access to relevant agency staff and services. *It's amazing how at the start of a dialogue someone can have such set ideas about something, such as going into a hostel, and after an hour and a half's conversation can completely turn around their thinking and attitude about that thing.* – Agency. *I've been coming here for a few weeks, I've heard what other people have said and it's got me thinking that treatment might be the right option for me. I never would have considered it before. I've started the ball rolling with my Carats Worker.* – Offender.
- ✚ **Officer/staff Skill Development:** Better situational assessment, understanding of individual needs, the use of discretion and more appropriate interventions. *I've learned more about the job from coming to these sessions in the last year than in all my previous 17 years as a prison officer.* – Prison Officer. *It helps me in my job. When you look at defendants now you read their files from probation and you think, 'yeah, I understand that now'. And that's great, because I can help my other colleagues on the bench and give them more understanding of people's background, people's lives.* – Magistrate.
- ✚ **Partnership with the Widest Range of Local Agencies:** On the ground and on an ongoing basis with all the benefits of sharing knowledge, contacts, skills and resources. *Bringing everyone together at the dialogues – offenders, agencies, police – is how we can change things for the better. Hearing what the problems are right from the horse's mouth and finding solutions. That makes a difference.* – Police.
- ✚ **Agency Effectiveness and Efficiency:** Exposing and addressing service gaps, immediate user feedback, staff morale uplift and escalation of policy issues. *The scheme involves people leaving prison who would otherwise be homeless.* – Agency worker. *The Scheme's inception is directly from this dialogue group.* - Prison Officer. *I've been doing this job for years and in my experience change happens more in sessions or groups like these where ideas work from the bottom up. It may take time but we are making progress.* – Prison Officer.
- ✚ **Community Perception Shifts:** *The public perception is the key thing in Bournemouth. It's no good just sitting back and hoping they'll go away. But they're not going to go away. They are part of our community and they have got their problems and I'm sure 90% of them don't particularly want their problems. So I think the rest of society does have a duty to try and help wherever possible to try and get these people back on the straight and narrow.*- Councillor, Bournemouth
- ✚ **A Forum of Engagement:** For people who don't easily meet to become part of a wholesome and progressive community. *The people who come in are often amazed by the rapport they get going with some of the service users. The environment dialogue creates is conducive to getting information.* – BCHA Prison Liaison Worker. *The client can now access the hostel after being street homeless for 6 months and focus on the support he requires. The process of dialogue has clearly shown how productive being heard can be.* – BCHA worker.
- ✚ **The Offender's Voice** in deciding the provision of agency services. *It tended to be previously that you'd discuss an adult without their knowledge, with agency input but with no service user input and decisions would be made on what would happen with that case...Now, you can engage directly with the service users.* – Antisocial Behaviour Coordinator for Bournemouth Borough Council.

BUSINESS CASE: How Threshold Dialogue Adds Value

- ✚ **Reduction in the Rate of Re-offending:** Dorset Threshold Dialogue has had insufficient numbers to show a statistically significant case, although we do have evidence on a case by case basis indicating enormous potential savings. For example, an analysis of the police records of arrests, remands and convictions over a 5 year period for a typical offender, 'Simon' (not a PPO), revealed the level of costs indicated below. Simon was stuck in the revolving door, offending to feed his drug habit. He attended dialogues in and out of prison and accessed other agency services. 9 months after release he was considered by agencies to be an ex-offender.

Annual cost carried by criminal justice system £24,000

Annual cost to the community in total * £120,000

* based on Home Office Study into the Social and Economic Costs of Crime

At a conservative estimate Simon has cost the community overall £600,000 over the past 5 years.

We estimate 84 offenders similar to Simon have attended Dialogues over the past 12 months.

- ✚ **Offenders Increased Co-operation with Services:** Costs of providing services are thereby reduced. "His response to police was very, very different. Whereas [before] he would kick-off big time, the last time, I had to personally arrest him for breaching his recall and he just sat patiently waiting for the car to arrive." – Police.
- ✚ **Agency Staff do their Day-job More Efficiently *During* the Dialogue:** They can address the issues that are relevant to their role in a high quality conversation with a group of offenders at one time. "Of the 8 guys in the session in the prison 5 of them were clients of mine, from families I'm working with; people who I need to engage with and are hard to reach within the community" – Family Intervention Worker, Bournemouth BC.
- ✚ **Agency Staff do their Day-job Better *Beyond* the Sessions:** They have a better understanding of the needs of offenders, better relationships, and a powerful network of partner agencies. This saves time and man power. "In my day to day work on the beat ... (Dialogue) has proved invaluable in opening doors that would otherwise have been firmly shut, breaking down barriers with offenders and their families." – Police.
- ✚ **On-going Professional Development for Agency Staff:** "I've learned more about the job from coming to these sessions in the last year than in all my previous 17 years as a prison officer." – Prison Officer.
- ✚ **Agency Staff Morale is Improved:** Staff can see and feel that they can make a difference to individuals' lives and the system as a whole. "I've been doing this job for years and in my experience change happens more in sessions or groups like these where ideas work from the bottom up." – Prison Officer.
- ✚ **Services Improve through Direct Feedback:** The offenders' voice can be escalated to impact practice and policy. "One of the changes in my practice has been that we do now try to engage with people if they're on the lists for enforcement action." – Anti-Social Behaviour Co-ordinator, Bournemouth
- ✚ **Interagency Improvements:** based on active partnership at ground level to improve strategy and service planning. "We are one of a dozen or so partners who came together on the back of the phrase 'line of sight', to look at a way of reaching people 'on the other side of the wall'... we had one important principle that underpinned it: we didn't have a single extra penny to spend. This particular project wouldn't have happened but for dialogue." – Housing Options Manager at Bournemouth Borough Council

BUSINESS CASE: How Threshold Dialogue Minimises Costs

- ✚ **Running Costs:** Restricted to expenses (e.g. travel) because staff attend as part of their day job role.
- ✚ **Training and Supervision Costs:** Cover facilitator and convenor training, facilitator supervision, and coaching and support to the Operations Group and Governance Board.
- ✚ **Set-up Costs:** Vary according to the local situation, but would mainly include additional start-up training. See 'Getting Started'.

GETTING STARTED

Prison Dialogue offers advice on how to get started. Setting up a Threshold Dialogue can be initiated from the top of an agency or organisation, from the middle ranks or from the basic grades – in fact anyone can start the ball rolling. Here are three options:

Top Down: Engage senior players in relevant agencies, position Threshold Dialogue in the strategic reducing re-offending plan, set-up a Governance Board, appoint an Operations (management) Group and commission them to set-up training of facilitators.

Whole-system: Gather a broad cross-section of agency staff to map the local system and explore value of partnering in Threshold Dialogue to reduce re-offending.

Bottom-up: Find a sponsor, find a facilitator, start a group, broaden those involved over time to include the whole system and invite senior players to experience the Threshold Dialogue and endorse/resource it fully.

For a conversation about this contact: jane.ball@prisondialogue.org

PRISON DIALOGUE

Prison Dialogue was founded by Peter Garrett in 1995 to find a practical way of addressing social fragmentation as outlined in the paper 'Dialogue - A Proposal' that he co-authored with David Bohm and Donald Factor. Prison Dialogue is dedicated to realising the practical application of these proposals at a local and national level as they manifest in crime, responses to crime and the criminal justice system. Prison Dialogue has amassed a wide range of know-how and experience with individual prisons and groups of prisons in the UK, with state-wide correctional systems in Nebraska, Washington and Massachusetts and with crime reduction at a national level in the West Indies.