First encounters matter. Encounters can be intimate or at arm’s length, but either way, they matter. Enduring encounters matter even more – indeed, they are critical. These are the key lessons of this book, the key findings of a research project spanning 2012–2013 documenting and exploring the constitutive encounter between prisons and rights-based non-governmental organisations (henceforth ‘NGOs’) in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and the Philippines.

The research project has been conducted with, through, and about three rights-based NGOs, who each in their own way, are involved in what might in broad terms be called prison reform. The original and founding puzzle of the project began from the assumption that reform efforts have different effects in different settings. We wanted to ask why and how reform projects in different settings have particular effects. As will become clear through our narrative, this basic question has undergone some transformations along the way, such that today we ask ourselves and our material not only about the effects of reform projects on the prison but also about the effects of prisons on reform agencies.

The reversal of our original question represents one of the central findings of our study: prisons affect reformers as much as reformers affect prisons. Based on our systematically gathered material and analysis, we are drawn to question one of the most commonly taken-for-granted claims of rights-based organisations – namely, that they are neutral and independent. The aspired to, claimed or assumed independence of reform actors or agencies is a myth; reform agencies and prisons are entangled and interdependent.

We hope our findings will contribute to the development of new ways of thinking about change in relation to prisons and perhaps even to a more radical questioning of the (over)use of principles of independence.
Given our institutional affiliation to DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture, it should go without saying that our intention is not to undermine rights-based approaches. On the contrary, we wish to ground them more solidly in social and institutional realities. Our questioning, in the modest tradition of social scientific research, is designed simply to illuminate social and institutional practices as they are and to propose a critical rethinking where necessary.

As well as casting light on encounters between NGOs and prisons, this book also aims to cast light on prison systems and practices in three under-researched contexts and thus add to the emerging – though still woefully inadequate – body of literature on ‘prisons beyond the west,’ contributing to a more global penology.

More details about the three organisations will be provided later. First we will introduce the key concepts that feature throughout the book.

Key analytical concepts

In our original project description we posed four sub-questions that hinted at our aspirations and contained seeds of ideas that have subsequently flourished and developed into the concepts we develop further through empirical analysis (Chapters 3 through 6) and theorising (Chapters 7 and 8). We asked how might the relationship between reform and prison practice be characterised. What dynamics and logics are at work? What webs of power and interdependence are produced? What effects do these have on the potential to bring about change?

It was these questions about which we were initially curious. They do not have straightforward answers. But it is these questions that implicitly informed the direction of the project and our subsequent thinking and led ultimately to three key ideas or concepts, briefly introduced below and unfolded throughout this volume. They are the idea of the prison as relational institution, the encounter as analytic lens, and the notion of institutional agency. The idea of the prison as a relational institution is an assumption that our study confirmed. Notions of the encounter and of institutional agency are concepts that we developed further through our empirical and theoretical analysis.

The prison as fundamentally relational

The first more or less foundational assumption that our study confirms is the idea of the prison as a fundamentally relational institution. We will expand on this notion later. Here it is enough to say that what this implies is a shift from understanding the prison in terms of its oft