

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The escalation of conflict in all regions of the world poses a serious challenge to human rights. How can our work as human rights educators contribute to transforming conflicts leading to more peaceful societies where human rights are promoted and respected?



Equitas has been exploring this topic and recently hosted an online conversation with human rights educators from around the globe to discuss ways in which HRE contributes to conflict transformation. We explored our understanding of conflict and conflict transformation, and ways in which HRE can contribute to transforming conflict. In this *Equitas Shares It!* posting, we share lessons learned from the online conversation, as well as reflections from the Equitas team based on our own programming.

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

WHAT IS CONFLICT?

There are many different ways to define conflict. Drawing from the online conversations and Equitas' experience, some of the ideas shared about conflict can be summarized as follows:

- conflict emerges when two parties have incompatible goals, attitudes and behaviours;
- although conflict is normal, inevitable and natural, it can have very negative and damaging consequences;
- conflicts which have damaging consequences are generally rooted in inequalities, discrimination, unequal distribution of resources, and incompatible attitudes and behaviours engrained in cultural traditions.

WHAT IS CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION?

Conflict transformation is an approach to addressing conflict which **focuses on the potential for constructive change**. It involves:

- people changing their perceptions on issues, actions, and of other people or groups;
- changing the way conflict is expressed, from competitive, aggressive, or violent, to nonviolent, conciliatory, or cooperative.
- modifying or transforming the consequences so that self-images, relationships, and social structures improve as a result of conflict instead of being harmed by it. ¹

¹ Lederach, J.P., (2003). Conflict transformation. Beyond Intractability. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Retrieved from <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/transformation>



HOW HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION CONTRIBUTES TO CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Human rights are inextricably linked with conflict. Human rights violations result from conflicts and the non-realization of human rights are root causes of conflicts. At the same time, the realization of human rights can contribute to conflict transformation. Although not exhaustive, the following points are ways in which human rights education can contribute to transforming conflicts and building peace.

APPLY A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH (HRBA)

As human rights educators, a human rights-based approach is central to our practice. The key elements of a human rights-based approach, including participation, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment and link to rights should be an integral part of our human rights education activities or programming. When our activities and programming relate to transforming conflict, a **human rights-based approach provides a clear framework to guide us.**

Applying HRBA to conflict transformation enables us to contribute to conflict transformation by addressing root causes from a human rights perspective. This ensures that the most vulnerable members of society, and those that are directly involved in the conflict, have a voice and can participate actively in transforming the conflict, thus also empowering the local populations. Furthermore, human rights standards and principles offer an internationally agreed-upon set of rules for handling and resolving conflicts. By framing conflicts in human rights discourse, and identifying actors as rights-holders and duty-bearers, we can de-personalize conflicts and put the emphasis on realization of human rights rather than on personal or group interests.



BUILD KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Key to transforming conflict is for **rights holders to know their human rights and claim them and for duty bearers to know their human rights obligations and fulfill them.** When people, especially local populations and vulnerable people such as children, LGBTI persons, and women, know their human rights they can better defend themselves, understand the responsibilities of duty bearers and hold them accountable. **Building duty bearers capacity around human rights** is essential to the development of a lasting peace and a meaningful, stable democracy in the long term. This is especially important in cases of transitional justice and reconciliation.

“We have identified there is a vacuum on progressive intellectual participation in political dialogue and transitional justice. Therefore, we aim to spread the knowledge of human rights education among the society and to promote its progress thinking in transitional justice process.” Subajani, human rights educator, Sri Lanka

IDENTIFY ROOT CAUSES

Without understanding the root causes of conflict we cannot transform it. As stated above, human rights concerns are at the core of conflict (i.e., unequal distribution of power and of resources, issues of security, identity, freedoms and participation). The participatory approach is the way we implement HRBA in human rights education. It enables us to address human rights issues from the perspective of participants lived experiences. It encourages social analysis aimed at the empowerment of participants to develop concrete actions for social change that are in accordance with human rights values and standards. Using a participatory approach in our HRE work linked to conflict transformation, therefore enables us to understand the root causes of conflict, and through power analysis, determine the actors and factors that contribute to structural and cultural violence.

“Through the spiral model (a model for designing social actions in accordance with a participatory approach), participants are able to reflect the root cause of the conflicts and they plan to organize advocacy.” John, Human rights educator, Kenya

“Taking the image of an iceberg, human rights violations (violent conflicts) are the tip of the iceberg, but below the surface of the water are the deep structures of power that result in exclusion, discrimination and inequalities.” Kalpalata, Human Rights Educator, Thailand

USE DIALOGUE TO BUILD TRUST AND FIND COMMON GROUND

HRE can be effective for bringing people together to voice their concerns and to dialogue in a non-confrontational way.

- In order to be effective in dialogue, it is important to create spaces for sharing different points of view. HRE can create a safe environment, help build trust and improve relationships;
- Human rights offers a set of common values that can serve to bridge the differences between different parties in a dialogue;
- Human rights can help to institutionalize interactions between marginalized groups and the State in a sustainable and non-violent way;
- In a human rights based approach to dialogue, both rights holders and duty bearers are responsible for finding solutions.



“La différence est une valeur fondamentale à préserver’, c’est plutôt la gestion de la différence qui doit changer.... Lorsqu’on se concentre sur le commun entre nous, je pense que la différence s’estompe par elle-même et lorsque ce qui nous rassemble est plus grand que ce qui nous sépare, le traitement et la gestion des situations de conflits s’éloignent petit à petit de la violence et de la haine et empruntent le chemin de l’indulgence et de la paix.” Ytto, human rights educator, Morocco

USE HRE TECHNIQUES, TOOLS AND METHODS

Human rights education offers a variety of techniques, tools and methods that can help transform conflict. Many of these were discussed in the online conversation, although it was also mentioned that there is no one strategy or method that can work for all conflicts. It is important to adapt these to the context. Some ideas that were brought up during the online conversation are outlined below:

- The use of a participatory approaches to HRE is crucial
- It is fundamental to including a gender perspective in HRE and conflict transformation
- A variety of methods, such as poster campaigns, debates among students, art, cultural expression, social media platforms and social programs can be used in human rights education.



“ArtLords provide a platform for dialogue among ordinary people on the streets of Kabul. It is giving a visual voice to the voiceless, which is the motivating dynamic behind the very existence of the movement” human rights educator, Afghanistan

This image is an example of art for HRE from ArtLords - countering violent extremism through urban art. <http://artlords.club/>

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The essential lesson from the online conversation is that human rights education is an effective tool that can contribute to conflict transformation. This posting provides some ideas, however, there remain many more angles to explore. Knowledge sharing about human rights education and conflict transformation is important in continuing to improve our work as a community of human rights educators as well as our contributions to positive social change. We encourage you to share your ideas with other human rights educators as well as with Equitas. We also welcome your feedback to this *Equitas Shares It!* article. Please send comments to slusthaus@equitas.org.

Thank you to all Equitas Alumni who participated in the online conversation for contributing their insights and examples to this knowledge building and sharing activity on conflict transformation.

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