

## **The Equitas Community: An online community of practice supporting human rights education**

by Julien Landry and Cristina Galofre<sup>1</sup>, with contributions from Vincenza Nazzari

Equitas – International Centre for Human Rights Education.

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### **Abstract**

Equitas launched the Equitas Community virtual platform (VP) to serve as an online community for alumni of its International Human Rights Training Program (IHRTTP). The community supports educators and activists to be more effective in their human rights education (HRE) work. The Equitas Community follows the organization's knowledge management strategy by using a participatory approach to draw upon the participants' existing knowledge and experience. This paper profiles some of the outcomes of the VP over the past six years, including: strengthening networks and relationships, sharing information, sharing and applying knowledge (transfer of learning) and changing perspectives, attitudes and values of human rights educators and defenders. The analysis suggests that despite some trade-offs, the community has been a worthwhile investment for Equitas. Participation IDRC's Learning Forum generated further reflections that will inform our work going forward, including: the importance of trust, realistic expectations and fostering a greater organizational culture of knowledge building and sharing.

### **A) Introduction**

Equitas - International Centre for Human Right Education is a non-governmental organization that has been working for over 40 years "for the advancement of equality, social justice and respect for human dignity in Canada and around the world through transformative education programs" (Equitas, 2011).

To meet its mandate, Equitas provides capacity-building programs for civil society organizations, national human rights institutions and governments to better develop and evaluate human rights education (HRE) programs and activities. The aim is to build the capacity of individuals and organizations to become more effective human rights workers and educators, and to promote human right values that bring about positive social change.

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<sup>1</sup> Cristina is an Education Specialist who administers the online *Equitas Community*. During an internship at Equitas in 2008, she developed and evaluated a pilot version of a Human Rights Education Design e-workshop. Cristina holds an M.A in Educational Technology from Concordia University. Prior to joining Equitas, Cristina worked in Colombia developing projects related to the educational use of information and communication technologies.

## **B) Objectives of Equitas' Knowledge Management Strategy**

Knowledge management (KM) is of fundamental importance to Equitas' ability to pursue its organizational vision and goals, by which "innovative programs equip organizations and the communities they serve to build a global culture of human rights" (Equitas, 2011). All Equitas activities and programs support this vision and are rooted in a participatory approach to human rights education (HRE).

While Equitas' work involves creating, organizing, diffusing and using knowledge, the participatory approach to transformative HRE relies initially on the existing knowledge and experience of participants as a starting point for program design and delivery. The underlying beliefs of the participatory approach are that people learn more effectively when "their own capacity and knowledge are valued, they are able to share and analyze their experiences in a safe and collective environment, and they are active participants in the learning process" (Equitas, 2007a, p. 25).

The participatory approach is implemented through a "spiral model" of learning. This is grounded in valuing and sharing participant experience and knowledge, in facilitating an analysis of shared experiences in combination with new information and theory, and in designing new strategies and planning and implementing specific actions (see Equitas, 2007a p. 25-26). In KM terms, this approach provides a structure and a methodology by which data, information and knowledge stemming from individual experience (*tacit knowledge*) can become *explicit knowledge* through collaborative learning and critical reflection. As such, the knowledge created becomes "formally articulated and removed from the original context of its creation or use" (Butcher, 2007, p. 2) and is increasingly exploitable and transferable into action in new environments and situations.

The participatory approach cuts across Equitas' programs and activities and represents the means by which the organization works to achieve the goal of building the capacity of human rights educators for more effective human rights and HRE work. The participatory approach also underlies the organization's KM strategy in support of this organizational goal. This coherence in objectives helps ensure that the KM strategy is not an end in itself (2007, p. 4), but remains a means to achieving organizational goals.

## **C) The Role of the Equitas Community in Knowledge Management**

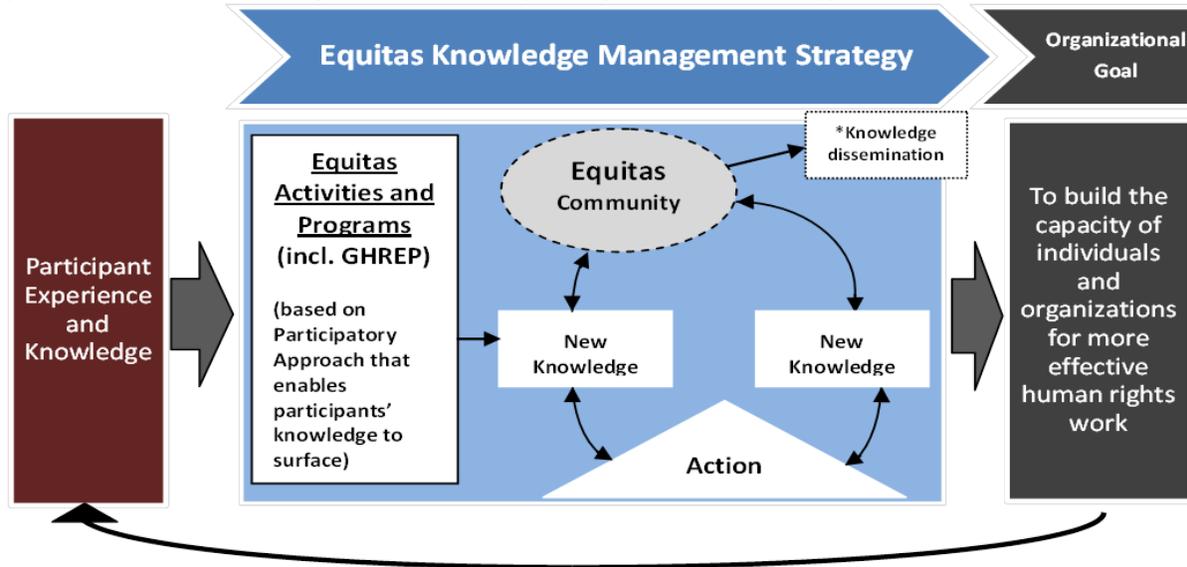
In planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating its participatory HRE programs, Equitas staff and alumni use a diversity of KM methodologies and tools that extend beyond the scope of this paper – ranging from face-to-face workshops and meetings (for knowledge sharing, creation and learning), storytelling, shared network drives and taxonomies (for capturing, documenting and storing knowledge) to "most significant change" analyses (for monitoring and evaluation), to name but a few (see Ramalingam, 2006).

The online "Equitas Community" was launched in 2006 as a communication and learning network for participants of Equitas' training programs and activities (Equitas, 2007b). Since then, it has become an integral component of the organization's KM system. As such, the Equitas Community has been used as a collaborative tool to support the professional development and ongoing learning of Equitas' alumni, staff and resource persons.

The Equitas Community is an online community of practice (CoP) of human rights educators and defenders. It was conceived primarily as a KM tool to support Equitas’ HRE programs and activities, particularly one of its larger programs, the Global Human Rights Education Program (GHREP), which in turn includes the International Human Rights Training Program (IHRTTP)<sup>1</sup>. CoPs regroup “professionals who share their knowledge ideas and practices in a common domain or practice” (Daele et al., 2007, p. 1). Beyond this role, the Equitas Community acts as a support for GHREP participants, volunteers and staff, before, during and after activities. It also serves as a space for networking and follow-up with members, where information is centralized and broadcasted.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the main role of the Equitas Community in KM is to support members in their knowledge sharing, knowledge creation and continuous learning for action. Members have access to an ongoing conversation around the ideas, issues, processes and tools that enhance their knowledge and ultimately strengthen their capacity for effective human rights and HRE work.

**Figure 1. The role of the Equitas Community in Equitas’ KM Strategy**



\*Note: At the time of writing, the dissemination of knowledge created within the Equitas Community is still prospective.

## D) Functions of the Equitas Community

The Equitas Community is a password-protected platform developed in Moodle<sup>ii</sup> that gathers more than 1,800<sup>iii</sup> human rights educators and defenders from over 98 countries around the world. Members include alumni of Equitas' human rights training programs, external facilitators and resource persons, interns and volunteers and Equitas staff. Although a large number of program alumni use the platform and are personally or professionally connected with potential candidates for Equitas programs (e.g. IH RTP), it is worth noting that the Equitas Community is not used for recruitment purposes.

The Equitas Community's main objectives are to:

- a) strengthen connections with other members of the Equitas network;
- b) discuss HRE experiences and activities;
- c) exchange information and HRE materials and resources; and
- d) share lessons learned and good practices (Equitas, 2011b).

The Equitas Community pursues these objectives through a diversity of activities, including a blended approach to learning that integrates support for Equitas' face-to-face training, follow-up and coaching activities using online pre-training forums, blogs during training sessions and online follow-up discussions. These tools and activities can be organized into the three categories that broadly describe the functions of the virtual platform:

**1) Networking:** To support interaction and networking by its members, the Equitas Community includes an electronic directory of members and groups based in eight geographical "regional groups". This searchable electronic directory includes a profile page for each member with their photo, contact data and information regarding their knowledge, skills and expertise as well as human rights interests. These profile pages enable people to identify and contact colleagues working on a specific country, region or human rights theme. In addition, the Equitas Community includes regional and thematic groups that allow members to meet and interact in their own language (i.e., French, English, Arabic, Bahasa , Spanish and Russian).

**2) Communication and Information Sharing:** Discussion forums are the primary communication tool used to generate dialogue and to share information. These forums also support the networking and collaborative learning of members. Two main discussion forums (in English and French) allow members to share news and information on the human rights situation in their countries – including exchanges in solidarity with fellow alumni in trouble (e.g., Haiti earthquake) – as well as information concerning their human rights and HRE work. In addition, through the discussion forums members exchange resources, solicit feedback and provide answers to questions. In order to store and retrieve the resources that have been shared by members, the Equitas Community uses an online repository of resources that include training manuals, publications, reports and links.

**3) Knowledge Creation and Sharing:** Activities and tools such as "online conversations" (i.e. structured and facilitated discussions about specific human rights themes conducted on a regular basis), online workshops and blogs about HRE activities enable members to reflect on their own practice and share their knowledge. Together, these activities and tools capture and share members' experience and "know-how" so that new knowledge can be created from these exchanges and documented, and members can strengthen their capacity to design, deliver, and evaluate HRE activities.

## **E) Evolution of the Equitas Community**

The online Equitas Community was piloted in 2005 and formally launched in 2006. A full-time administrator was hired to maintain and ensure the overall vitality of the virtual platform and to provide technical support. In 2007 a core committee of four Equitas staff members was established to provide the organizational support required to plan and design activities that would help cultivate the online community. In 2008, the Equitas Community was formally included as a component of the GHREP program.

The goal and objectives of the Equitas Community have remained the same over the years. What has changed is how the platform is used to promote knowledge sharing and creation. Over time, the Equitas Community has evolved from a platform that primarily supported IHRTTP alumni networking and information sharing to a CoP that fosters learning and knowledge building.

As a result of Equitas' HRE activities, the number of registered members has grown significantly and spans across the world. Although "distance, size, organizational affiliation, and cultural differences [...] make building and sustaining communities [or practice] significantly more difficult" (Wenger et al., 2002, p.116), these factors have not prevented members from sharing experiences and learning from each other in a collective and safe environment through the Equitas Community. In fact, members appreciate the possibility of sharing and receiving diversified information from people from around the world. This was highlighted by a member commenting on the reasons for using the virtual platform: *"to be informed about Human Rights situation in the World from the people [whom] I know and can believe"* (Equitas, 2010c).

Given that CoPs evolve through different stages (Wenger, 1998), different activities, events and tools have been implemented over time in order to respond to the evolving needs of the Equitas Community. These strategies have had varying levels of success in addressing the changing needs of members, creating interest and active participation as well as enabling knowledge sharing.

### **Discussion Forums**

In 2006, the Equitas Community began with two discussion forums – one in French and one in English – primarily to communicate and follow up with IHRTTP alumni. Over the years, additional discussion forums have been progressively added to provide online spaces for a number of regional groups (alumni working in the same region) and thematic groups (alumni from around the world working on the same issue). This has strengthened the platform's role in supporting networking as well as knowledge creation and sharing. The lifespan and level of activity of these groups – and the forums they use – have varied significantly, depending on their perceived value by members. Active involvement of Equitas staff, as well as the participation of a "regional facilitator" (local staff who volunteered to moderate a regional group), have significantly influenced the level of participation and interaction within these groups and forums.

### **From Virtual Conferences to Online Conversations**

"Virtual conferences" were launched in 2007 as a means for members to share their experiences on specific topics related to their human rights and HRE work. Recently, these structured and facilitated exchanges have been renamed "online conversations" to better reflect Equitas' participatory approach and how knowledge is something members produce together and share (as one does in a conversation), rather than a commodity that one possesses and broadcasts (e.g. at a traditional conference).

### **Online Training of Trainers**

In order to strengthen the learning opportunities offered by the virtual platform and to reach a broader number of Equitas alumni, an online training-of-trainers workshop was pilot-tested in 2008. The goal of the “Human Rights Education Design e-Workshop” was to increase the capacity of IH RTP alumni to plan, design, and evaluate effective human rights education events for specific target groups. Two pilot e-workshops were delivered in 2008 and 2009 with 10 participants. Overall, alumni expressed that the e-workshops were well-designed and allowed them to reflect – both individually and collectively – on their experience. E-workshops provided new information and theory, allowed them to practice the skills they learned and identify strategies to apply new knowledge to their own working context. Plans for revisions to the e-workshops have been made based on participants’ recommendations, but the online training has not been offered again due to financial and human resource constraints.

### **Integration of New Online Tools – Advances and Limitations**

Another driving force in the Equitas Community’s evolution is the integration of new online tools – such as blogs, wikis, etc. – to support collaborative learning and knowledge building. The advent of new online tools has facilitated more diversified functions on the virtual platform.

For example, the integration of blogs to the Equitas Community started in 2007 as a strategy to increase interest and participation from its members. After four years, blogs have become an important resource for members to learn and share experiences on facilitating HRE activities in their own context. Most importantly, blogs have also been used as a tool to reflect on the practice of being a human rights educator. A testament to their pertinence and value for practitioners, the responsibility of blogging has now largely been transferred from Equitas staff to alumni around the world. As this member underscored it:

*“The blog site is indeed a great opportunity for us alumni here [in the Philippines] to share to the Equitas alumni around the world how do we give back the learning we have gained through the IH RTP towards building a culture of human rights.”* (personal communication, November 8, 2010)

However, the limitations of functions available in the Moodle platform, as well as some technological problems, have at times slowed or interrupted access to the Equitas Community and/or to some of its functions. In addition, the potential for using different tools beyond discussion forums is contingent upon the members’ level of familiarity with such tools.

### **Support to Face-to-Face Activities**

Finally, since its inception, the virtual platform has consistently served as a support to face-to-face activities and exchanges. It is the nature of this support that has changed. For instance, over time, the virtual platform has been more systematically integrated into the face-to-face activities. In addition, the resources that the Equitas Community offers have evolved and grown in number. As both the technology and the organization’s work keep evolving, the Equitas Community’s role in supporting capacity-building for effective human rights and HRE work will likewise continue to expand.

## F) Equitas Community's Contribution to Outcomes

Since 2006, the Equitas Community has played an increasingly important role within this KM strategy and in building the capacity of individuals and organizations for effective human rights and HRE work.

### Reach of the Community

Equitas monitors the **use and access** to the virtual platform by participants of IHRTP by administering general follow-up questionnaires six and 24 months after the Program. Between 2007 and 2010, an average of 60% (68 individuals) of IHRTP alumni responded to these questionnaires. A strong majority of them noted that they accessed the virtual platform at rates ranging from 86% to 93%. The minority of respondents who have not used this resource list technical and technological challenges (e.g., their local internet connection), as well as time limitations, as the main factors limiting their participation.

### Benefit to Members' Capacity and Work

Of the alumni who did access the virtual platform, a majority – ranging from 84% to 99% between 2007 and 2010 – agreed that it has benefitted their work. The survey findings suggest that the Equitas Community has contributed to meeting Equitas' organizational goal of building capacity for more effective human rights and HRE work, and some of the GHREP's stated outcomes (see Equitas, 2007b, Annex 1), including:

**1) Strengthening Networks and Relationships:** The Equitas Community serves as a space for exchange between staff, alumni and other community members. Consistently, alumni have cited the value of accessing the virtual platform in order to maintain, expand and strengthen their networks within and across regions. Comments from members also suggest that the virtual platform allows them to foster and maintain personal relationships with other members to exchange information and experiences:

*"This community is the only platform where participants from any batch or region can talk and share their learning with others. My feeling is that when I visit the community it seems to me that I entered in the classroom at John Abbott College<sup>iv</sup>. I believe IHRTP is the beginning of our journey and [the] Community is the vehicle by which we are going [to] establish HRE in the universe."* (Equitas, 2010a)

*"I find it very useful to get in touch with other participants. We also get a lot of interesting material about human rights. I like the discussions about HR issues that I've been able to read. I think the online community is one of the most important things to stay in touch and not forget people we met, and knowledge we acquired during the IHRTP."* (2010a)

Members are not only able to keep in touch and keep track of each other's work. They can also expand their networks strategically by joining regional groups, in order to align and coordinate their work in the region and to organize for concrete action.

A compelling example of this is the emergence of the Arab Network for Human Rights and Citizenship Education (ANHRE), a network of IHRTP alumni in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Members from this region were successful in using the Equitas Community as the enabling environment to exercise a democratic process that led to the emergence of a formal network spanning the region. Having used the virtual platform for networking since 2007, members held transparent and democratic electronic elections on the Equitas Community in October 2008, electing a Coordination Committee with members from seven countries (ANHRE,

2010). ANHRE is now an independent non-governmental network working to unify and coordinate human rights and citizenship education efforts across the region (ANHRE, 2011).

**2) Sharing Information:** Another contribution to achieving the programs' outcomes is the development and sharing of information, tools, resources and links that contribute to the effectiveness of alumni's work as human rights educators. As one alumnus explains:

*"I got useful material on women's rights which helped my work on gender equality and some other good links"* (Equitas, 2010b, p. 11).

Or as another member put it, *"c'est ma bibliothèque de références, de ressources et d'expertise"* (p. 11). Users have also highlighted the emergence of innovative ideas based on this type of information sharing (Equitas, 2007c).

**3) Sharing and Applying Knowledge (Transfer of Learning):** "Knowledge gives meaning and perspective to information, and is used to provide guidance for action" (ALGP, 2006, p. 7). The Equitas Community facilitates the practical application of members' knowledge because the virtual platform allows greater access to – and sharing of – information, and it facilitates the process by which information is put into perspective and transferred into knowledge. In other words, alumni develop new knowledge based on the information accessible through the Equitas Community (see Figure 1 above). As an example of knowledge sharing, one alumnus states:

*"[The] Equitas community is a platform where I can meet and talk with all the alumni's, facilitators, resource persons and Equitas staff. Here I can ... **share my knowledge and experience**<sup>vi</sup> of human rights in my country context and came to know about others experience. This platform is considered an open space to learn and share."* Equitas, (2010c).

As a testament to the contribution of virtual knowledge sharing, some alumni have stated that accessing the Equitas Community clarifies what is learned at the IHRTTP (Equitas, 2007c). Other members have suggested that knowledge is not only shared, but also transferred, as it is put into practice in new contexts:

*"You can **adapt and apply** other's best practices into your own work"* (Equitas, 2010c).

*"I also **use** some of the most successful techniques in HRE which were posted on the Equitas on-line Community and proved to be successful"* (Equitas, 2010c).

*"Les éléments des discussions sont toujours instructifs et certains éléments sont **utilisés** comme argumentaire dans mon travail<sup>vii</sup>"* (Equitas, 2010c).

*"I have seen activities organised by alumni elsewhere in the world and have **adopted** some of them in my organization"* (Equitas, 2010c).

These cases suggest that there is a transfer not only of information, but also of knowledge. That is, participants exchange "the understanding people develop as they react to and use information" (Butcher, 2007, p. 2), which alumni are able to channel into their work. Alumni generally consider the information to be trustworthy simply because it is accessible on the Equitas Community. This likely contributes further to this application of knowledge and transfer of learning.

**4) Changing Perspectives, Attitudes and Values:** According to Newell et al. (2002) new skills, attitudes, values and behaviours are created or acquired over time in a CoP. That the

learning occurring through the Equitas Community contributes to changes in alumni's perspectives, attitudes and values is consistent with this argument. As these members attest:

*"I have learned about happenings and state of HR in the world and I am more aware of them, so it **affects my attitudes** towards society globally as well as my behaviour in daily work"* (Equitas, 2010b, p. 11).

*"I've been able to read different points of views about several HR topics and it has helped me to increase my knowledge and **perceptions** of some of them"* (Equitas, 2010a).

Although none of these outcomes can be exclusively attributable to the use of the Equitas Community, it is evident that the platform is an enabling environment that facilitates and significantly contributes to their attainment.

Broadly, the outcomes suggest that members are "[utilizing their] learning from the IH RTP" (Equitas, 2007b, Annex 1, p. 6); "[transferring] acquired human rights knowledge, values as well as HRE skills and techniques"; and "engaging in networking and collaborative efforts" (Annex 1, p. 2). As such, the Equitas Community contributes in part to the achievement of Equitas' objectives, and particularly those of the Global Human Rights Education Program.

## **G) Effectiveness and Efficiency**

The Equitas Community has shown itself to be an efficient and effective means of knowledge management and capacity building. However, there are some important tradeoffs to consider.

**1) Effectiveness.** The Equitas Community has proven effective in that it enables information sharing in a variety of formats. Stories, resources, tips, links, announcements and events relating to HRE can be disseminated and accessed at any time on one single platform. As a result, the platform effectively serves as a resource and provides a space where users can address content needs related to their practice. In many cases where alumni and staff have used the virtual platform to pose specific questions, request information or resources specific to their content area, the online resource has produced the desired results.

The Equitas Community is also used effectively to **ask for suggestions, request support or solutions to specific problems**. Users access each other's knowledge and ideas in order to quickly respond to challenges and issues as they arise in their work. For example, an education specialist from Equitas was delivering a training workshop in Vancouver. Trainers attending the workshop highlighted the need to strengthen their skills in conducting group discussions with children who do not share a common language. The education specialist sent this request through the Equitas Community, asking for members' ideas on how to address this challenge. Within two days, the request received eight responses from members from five different countries who shared suggestions of activities and strategies they had used in their own work to address this specific problem.

**2) Efficiency:** The Equitas Community is also comparatively efficient as a networking tool, enabling "one-to-one communication" (via individual e-mail messages) as well as "one-to-many communication" (via discussion forums and blogs). Whereas other communication tools and mechanisms for knowledge sharing are limited in their capacity to reach many members at once, this virtual platform enables any member to communicate with all members simultaneously: the information is disseminated widely and rapidly through the use of automatic email notifications.

**3) Trade-offs.** There are four trade-offs associated with the use of this virtual platform.

- a. **The time and financial cost** for Equitas staff to maintain and facilitate the activities on the Equitas Community is considerable. Also, there are additional costs related to technical support, troubleshooting and web-hosting expenses. While other online mechanisms might be less costly to operate and maintain (e.g., listservs, conference calls), the benefits afforded by this platform seem to outweigh the costs, so long as the technology functions smoothly.
- b. **The time and resources required to foster quality participation** from a significant number of members, and the other tasks towards which these resources could be applied.
- c. **The complexity of the platform, with its multi-functional tools (e.g. blogs, forums, etc) can compromise user-friendliness and deter alumni from accessing on a regular basis, if at all.** Strategies to ensure the usability of the Equitas Community have included integrating the virtual platform in the organization's programming so that participants can be introduced to the online environment during face-to-face meetings and activities. This enables in-person troubleshooting, encourages future online participation and comes at relatively little cost.
- d. **The asynchronous nature of the tools enables access to information at all times, but does not permit the kind of real-time interaction, social presence and support that synchronous tools do.** While this represents a trade-off, it remains practical to rely on the former, given the global nature of Equitas' membership (i.e. overcoming challenges related to different time zones, internet connection reliability, etc.).

Assessing the impact of this work – both online and offline – is a constant challenge and a high priority. The types of changes resulting from Equitas' work are largely qualitative in nature: changes in behaviours, attitudes and values, changes in the way individuals and organizations conduct their work, changes in relationships, empowerment and social change, etc. As such, Equitas has relied primarily on self-reported qualitative data (e.g. the quotes cited throughout this paper) to assess the achievement of these outcomes.

To date, the organization has judged that these types of data, along with other available quantitative measures, demonstrate that the Equitas Community contributes significantly to the desired outcomes and institutional goal. Although no calculation has been made in terms of dollar value, it is judged that the trade-offs associated with maintaining the Equitas Community are justified, particularly when considering the value of an active online space for knowledge creation and sharing, while avoiding the unaffordable costs of ongoing face-to-face interactions.

## H) Post-Learning Forum Reflections

Equitas' participation in the Learning Forum yielded a number of reflections that will contribute to the articulation of future directions in the use of its virtual platform.

### **The Importance of Fostering Trust**

Equitas increasingly recognizes the fundamental importance of fostering trust among the members of this online community of practice. As is cited above, a key reason alumni use the Equitas Community is that they can trust and rely on the information they access there. This is in large part due to the fact that access to the virtual platform is limited to members who share a common experience and are building knowledge based on that common experience.

However, while fostering an environment of trust is essential to the virtual platform's knowledge-building role, it sometimes competes with the other knowledge-sharing objectives that Equitas has envisioned for its platform in the medium term. For example, although limited access ensures a more manageable flow of information, it can limit how far an organization can disseminate and share its knowledge beyond its network of alumni to the broader community of human rights educators and practitioners.

As such, Equitas will need to develop mechanisms and strategies for organizing, synthesizing, packaging and eventually disseminating knowledge beyond the Equitas Community. Some existing practices and features of the virtual platform – such as the use of tags, 'search' functions, summaries of online conversations by Equitas staff, etc. – already contribute to this process.

### **Trust and Social Capital**

The issue of trust prompted a second reflection about the role of social capital. Social capital has been defined as the "social relations that have productive benefits" (Claridge, 2004); it is "about the value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity" (Dekker and Uslaner 2001; Uslaner 2001, as cited in Claridge, 2004).

Trust is commonly understood as a key element of social capital. "Some authors equate trust with social capital (Fukuyama 1995; Fukuyama 1997), some see trust as a source of social capital (Putnam et al. 1993), some see it as a form of social capital (Coleman 1988)" (Claridge, 2004). Some authors have linked the production of social capital to the value derived from communities of practice and networks (Wenger, Trayner and de Laat, 2011). As Equitas continues to build trust both offline and online, it will be important to explore and articulate the link between a trustworthy online environment, the strengthening of social capital (e.g. network building) and enhanced knowledge creation and sharing.

### **Dunbar's Number and the 90-9-1 Principle**

Another useful reflection resulting from the Learning Forum relates to the implications of "Dunbar's number" and the "90-9-1 principle" (as cited in Creech, 2011). Dunbar (1992) suggests that: there is a maximum of 100 to 200 stable social relationships that any one person can sustain. Nielson's 90-9-1 principle states that of the total membership of a community, 1% of the membership will do most of the interaction; 9% of the participants will contribute a little, while 90% will "lurk" or listen in on the conversation.

Many of the Learning Forum participants agreed with these observations based on their experience with VPs. Moving forward, these numbers will help Equitas develop and manage realistic expectations around what successful online participation looks like.

### **Building on the Existing Culture of Knowledge Sharing**

Finally, the Learning Forum sparked a reflection around the importance of understanding the existing culture of knowledge sharing within the organization. There is a sense that the capacity of Equitas staff, partners and participants/alumni needs to be strengthened in order to enhance the efficiency and the extent to which knowledge is shared.

One option to explore this idea is to integrate KM into the organization's work more intentionally. For instance, by revising some of the program content to include foundational notions and concepts related to KM, particularly as they relate to the learner-centered and action-based participatory approach that underpins the organization's work. In doing so, Equitas would be naming and fostering a stronger "learning culture" through its programs, thereby strengthening participants' capacity to manage and disseminate knowledge both during and after their participation.

In turn, the organization might increase the value that participants and alumni assign to KM and generate greater buy-in and participation in activities related to knowledge sharing and dissemination. This process would involve using Equitas programming to transform tacit knowledge about KM into explicit knowledge, and would further build the capacity of participants for knowledge sharing. This will also increase the likelihood that participants will feel committed to participate in the knowledge building process and see their participation as a contribution to such a process.

## **I) Future Changes to the Equitas Community**

The Equitas Community has provided an environment that promotes a culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing among its members. In an effort to build on this and in light of the reflections outlined above, Equitas foresees improving the Equitas Community in the medium and long term in order to strengthen its capacity to support ongoing learning, networking and knowledge sharing and creation.

### **Medium-Term Changes:**

Funding for the Equitas Community is available until 2013. Therefore, medium-term changes must be commensurate with the organization's capacity for implementation within this timeframe. Equitas will continue to use the online activities and tools that have worked well so far, such as online conversations and members' blogs about HRE activities. In addition, Equitas will continue to strengthen its blended learning approach to ensure that the knowledge produced as a result of its face-to-face HRE activities can be captured and shared with all members. The emphasis in the medium term will thus be to improve the way in which knowledge produced within the Equitas Community is organized, synthesized and shared. As a result, members will be able to more easily retrieve and use this knowledge, further contributing to their human rights and HRE work.

### **Longer-Term Changes:**

In the longer term, new technological platforms will be explored to better support the role of the Equitas Community. With a consistently growing number of members it is important to assess the Moodle platform's technological capacity to support further expansion. In addition,

information and communication tools, including social media applications, are constantly evolving. There is a need to analyze other technological platforms that may better support the networking, information sharing and knowledge building objectives of the Equitas Community.

### **Revised Strategic Visioning**

Equitas is revising its strategic vision for 2012-2017 to include an analysis and revision of the organization's KM strategy and the role and contribution of the Equitas Community within it. Preliminary discussions around the organization's strategic vision have included mention of enhanced HRE knowledge production and dissemination in support of equitable political, economic and social development.

### **Moving From Knowledge Sharing to Knowledge Creation**

With regards to the Equitas Community, this implies expanding its role as a knowledge-creation environment. It implies shifting towards a model where knowledge is not only shared with all members but where members are actively involved in the collaborative process of creating knowledge and HRE content because they see its value; that is, a shift from "knowledge for all" to "construction of knowledge by all" (Albright, 2005, p. 15).

### **More Systematic Documentation of Lessons and Impact**

Another objective is implementing processes and tools on the virtual platform that enable members to be more systematic in the way they capture, document and organize lessons and impact stories from their HRE work. Consistent with some of the reflections presented here, there is a complementary desire to systematize the collective knowledge generated within the Equitas Community in order to disseminate it to a broader HRE audience – beyond Equitas partners and alumni to the broader community of human rights educators and practitioners. With adequate financial support, the Equitas Community can secure an enhanced role within a renewed KM strategy and continue supporting Equitas' work in building the capacity of individuals and organizations for more effective human rights and HRE work.

## **I) Conclusion**

Six years into its implementation, the Equitas Community has proven relatively effective and efficient in supporting the organization – and particularly the GHREP program – to pursue its goal of building the capacity of individuals and organizations for more effective human rights and HRE work.

Embedded within a broader KM framework built on a participatory approach and grounded in the knowledge and experience of participants, the virtual platform has served as a key space for knowledge sharing and knowledge production (see Figure 1 above). As alumni's statements have suggested throughout this paper, the Equitas Community also reinforces a number of outcomes stemming from the organization's work: strengthening networks and relationships, sharing information, sharing and applying knowledge (transfer of learning) and changing perspectives, attitudes and values of human rights educators and defenders.

As Equitas embarks on a revised strategic direction, it will look closely at the virtual platform's contribution to date and associated trade-offs. As the organization evolves, so too must its KM strategy, and consequently its knowledge management tools.

In light of its strategic objectives, Equitas will therefore consider the prospective role of its online community of practice in the evolution of its knowledge management strategy. While the Equitas Community has proven successful thus far in supporting organizational and programmatic goals, there may yet be room for improvement in creating a stronger knowledge-sharing culture within the organization and alumni networks, in creating, organizing and disseminating knowledge and ultimately, in enabling a more effective space where people's capacity for human rights and HRE work is enhanced. The concrete articulation of these changes will rely on closer monitoring and evaluation of the online platform's performance and its role within the organization, a process which this paper has moved forward.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The International Human Rights Training Program (IHRTTP) is an annual three-week training program designed to strengthen the capacity of individuals and organizations to engage in effective human rights education (e.g., training, awareness campaigns, information dissemination and advocacy) aimed at building a global culture of human rights. For more information, please see <http://equitas.org/en/what-we-do/human-rights-defenders-and-educators/ihrtp/overview/>

<sup>ii</sup> Moodle is a free open source Course Management System (CMS). See [www.moodle.org](http://www.moodle.org)

<sup>iii</sup> Number of registered members as of December 2011. On average, there are approximately 245 users who log on monthly.

<sup>iv</sup> Venue for the International Human Rights Training Program.

<sup>v</sup> “It is my library for references, resources and expertise.”

<sup>vii</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>vii</sup> “Aspects of the discussions are always instructive and some aspects are used as arguments in my own work.”

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