TRAINING REPORT

Grounding Anti-Racism in Human Rights

From Reflection to Action in International Cooperation



Montréal • October 22–23, 2026

Ottawa • October 26–27, 2026

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WORKSHOP REPORT | MONTRÉAL, 22–23 OCTOBER 2026 | OTTAWA, 26–27 OCTOBER 2026

Equitas facilitated two workshops for Cooperation Canada on applying a human rights-based approach to anti-racism in international cooperation. The discussions connected the way organizations work with partners to the way they make decisions and respond to racism internally. Participants identified changes they could pursue through existing policies, programs and relationships.

Human rights and PANEL in practice

Participants explored how a human rights-based approach changes the way organizations respond to people's needs. It recognizes people as rights holders who can shape decisions and claim their rights. It also clarifies who has a duty or responsibility to act and how people can seek a response or remedy.

PANEL brings together five pillars for applying a human rights-based approach. Participants used each pillar to assess practices within their organizations and partnerships, identifying what was working and where changes were needed.

Participation. People affected by decisions need a genuine say in them. Build in interpretation, compensation and time, and agree early on who makes decisions and controls the data.

Accountability and transparency. Make responsibilities visible and respond to the concerns people raise. Provide accessible feedback and reporting channels, clarify who follows up and recognize how funding dependency can make it hard for partners to speak up.

Non-discrimination and equality. Identify and remove barriers that affect people differently. Review pay and hiring practices, make information accessible and consider how geography and resources affect participation in programs.

Empowerment. Support people's ability to claim rights and act on their priorities. Examples included allowing partners to manage budgets, funding community-led advocacy and adapting methods so young people can shape initiatives that affect them.

Links to human rights. Use relevant human rights standards to guide context analysis, program design, advocacy and staff training. Explain those standards in language staff, partners and communities can use.

Four terms and what they mean in practice

Participants explored four terms commonly used in international cooperation and discussed how each can guide decisions and practices.

Localization. Participants described a range of practices, from adapting programs to local contexts to giving local partners authority over priorities, budgets and evaluation.

Anti-racism. Participants emphasized actively identifying and challenging racism in behaviour, organizational practices and systems. They raised concerns about the term becoming a buzzword when it carries no commitment to change policies or routines.

Decolonization. Participants linked the term to addressing ongoing colonial harms, changing inherited structures and supporting self-determination and sovereignty. They also raised the risk of imposing definitions and priorities from the Global North.

Co-construction. Participants described developing initiatives together from the earliest stages through evaluation, drawing on experiential and technical knowledge. Unequal power and fixed funding requirements can limit the decisions partners can genuinely shape.

Anti-racism through two sector scenarios

International volunteering and white saviourism

The first scenario examined a volunteer placement where a person from the Global North can receive more recognition than the local people leading the work. Participants described how this can happen when the volunteer speaks for a project, presents collective results as an individual achievement or is treated as an expert because they come from abroad. The benefits can also be uneven: volunteers gain visibility and professional experience while local partners have fewer opportunities to tell their own story or benefit from similar exchanges.

Participants stressed reciprocity and proposed that local partners define the purpose of placements, shape the selection and preparation of volunteers, and help decide how results are communicated. Ongoing support during a placement can help volunteers listen, recognize the expertise already present and adjust their role to partners' priorities.

Workplace racism and organizational accountability

The second scenario explored what can happen when staff raise concerns about racism in an organization with public commitments to equity and inclusion. Participants discussed how defensiveness can shift attention from the concern to colleagues' intentions or to the way it was raised. They examined how racial and gender stereotypes can undermine the credibility of Black women who speak up, and how these dynamics can affect job security, professional networks and career progression.

Participants discussed how to help colleagues recognize harm while taking concerns seriously when they are raised. They called for accessible reporting, protection from retaliation and clear responsibility for investigating concerns and following up. Managers and colleagues have a role in addressing racism, including when the people affected have already taken the risk of speaking up.

The Racial Transformation Continuum

The Racial Transformation Continuum is a reflection tool for examining how organizations respond to racism. It describes five stages, from practices that exclude people on the basis of race, through lack of awareness, recognition and targeted responses, to active work to change structures that reproduce racial inequity. Teams can use it to examine policies and day-to-day practices, identify gaps and decide where to act.

Participants noted that the same organization can be at different stages in hiring, governance and partnerships. For example, a more diverse staff can coexist with a leadership structure that leaves decision-making power concentrated. Participants saw value in looking at both internal practices and external commitments, and in discussing how far an organization is ready to go given its actual decisions and resources.

Building on progress already made

Many proposed actions grew out of work participants could already point to, such as pre-departure training, equity initiatives, racial justice committees and policy review mandates. These gains gave participants a reason for hope and practical ways to keep going. In several cases, the next step was to build on a policy, relationship or space that colleagues and partners had already invested in.

Carry equity commitments into day-to-day work. Use existing committees and policy reviews to identify gaps, engage managers and improve how staff raise concerns. Continue regular dialogue so work can survive changes in staffing and priorities.

Give partners more influence. Involve partners earlier in decisions about programs, volunteer placements and events, and give them a greater role in reporting and evaluation. Review how visits and fundraising materials portray communities and whose expertise they recognize.

Use existing roles and relationships to sustain change. Share the tools with colleagues, bring proposals to leadership and connect them to mandates and organizational values. Build on relationships with communities, partners and allies who can help shape and sustain the work.

Potential barriers to implementation

Time, staffing, funding restrictions and competing priorities all affect what teams can carry forward. Participants also described the need for leadership backing, the difficulty of sustaining initiatives that depend on a few people, and the pressure that political backlash and fundraising demands can put on anti-racism commitments.

What respondents learned and hope to see next

The post-training survey received 19 responses, nine from Montréal and ten from Ottawa. Sixteen respondents identified as women and three as men. On an optional question allowing multiple selections, four selected Black, Indigenous and People of Colour and three selected immigrant, newcomer or refugee. Nine left that question blank. These data describe the survey respondents.

All 19 respondents were mostly or completely satisfied. Seventeen rated their increased knowledge of anti-racism and the human rights-based approach 4 or 5 out of 5, and 18 gave the same rating to usefulness for their work. These were self-assessments at the end of the training.

Practical learning and encouragement

Respondents described gaining shared language, making clearer connections between anti-racism and human rights, and using PANEL and the continuum to see where organizational practices could change. Several highlighted the value of drafting an action plan or learning from others in the sector.

The workshop also gave participants space to talk openly about difficult issues and make new connections. Some feedback conveyed renewed motivation to continue anti-racism work. Hearing how peers are working through similar challenges can help participants feel less alone as they carry the work forward.

Follow-up opportunities for Cooperation Canada and other organizations in the sector

Share resources participants can apply. Respondents requested a terminology handout, access to the electronic human rights training guide and more guidance on applying a human rights-based approach to international work.

Engage decision-makers and keep peer exchange going. Respondents asked for guidance on engaging senior leadership, greater participation from people with decision-making authority and dedicated spaces for anti-racism exchange. An opt-in contact list was also suggested.

Follow up with participants after three months. Fourteen of 19 respondents indicated interest in a follow-up at about three months. Equitas will follow up with participants to hear what they have tried, what helped or got in the way, and what support would help them continue. Equitas will share selected reflections from the responses with Cooperation Canada and other participants.

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