

INTRODUCTION TO NONVIOLENCE

What is nonviolence, and why use it?

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In this handbook, our working definition of nonviolence is based on a desire to end all violence – be it physical violence or what’s been called ‘structural violence’ and ‘cultural violence’ (see ‘violence’, p27) – without committing further violence. This handbook was written by people from around the world with a range of perspectives on the subject.

Many organisations and campaigns committed to nonviolence produce statements of their nonviolent principles that explain their perspectives. WRI’s Statement of Principles says:

WRI embraces nonviolence. For some, nonviolence is a way of life. For all of us, it is a form of action that affirms life, speaks out against oppression, and acknowledges the value of each person.

This *Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns* has been written to support the work of groups putting nonviolence into action.

Nonviolence can combine active resistance, including civil disobedience, with dialogue; it can combine non-cooperation-withdrawal of support from a system of oppression-with constructive work to build alternatives. As a way of engaging in conflict, sometimes nonviolence attempts to bring reconciliation with it: strengthening the social fabric, empowering those at the bottom of society, and including people from different sides in seeking a solution. Even when such aims cannot immediately be achieved, our non-violence holds us firm in our determination not to destroy other people.

WRI statement of principles

Nonviolence can imply much more than this, including a desire to change power relations and social structures, an attitude of respect for all humanity or all life, or even a philosophy of life. We encourage you to explore these areas.

Discovering the differences in emphasis and sharing insights into nonviolence can be a rich experience in the context of a group preparing to take nonviolent action together.

People have different reasons for adopting nonviolence. Some advocate it because they see it as an effective technique for bringing about desired social changes, others because they seek to practice nonviolence as a way of life. There is a spectrum here, and many people lie somewhere in between. Such differences may surface during a campaign, but usually a statement of principles or guidelines specific to a particular campaign can accommodate people's attitudes across a spectrum. (See 'maintaining nonviolence during an action' p102)

Resource: "What makes an action nonviolent?", available at <http://www.warresisters.org/nva/nva0701-2.htm>

Certain differences in understanding, however, can be a source of friction, and need to be brought into the open. For example, the question of damage to property can be divisive; while some nonviolent activists seek to avoid damage to property, others believe that such action is a cost worth inflicting on an opponent. (See 'violence' p27.)

Nonviolence is more than the absence of violence, and more than saying "no". Nonviolent activists also want our activities to be an expression of the future we are trying to create, and our behaviour reflects the world we want. When we use phrases such as 'speaking truth to power', 'affirming life', or 'respecting diversity', we are invoking fundamental values that themselves are a source of strength for us and a point of contact with those we want to reach.

The pragmatic dimensions of active nonviolence

Active nonviolence has been used as an approach to overcoming war, injustice, and environmental destruction, resolving conflicts of all kinds, or simply leading a healthy, responsible life-or all of the above. It is generally understood that this approach is based on a set of principles that have obvious and important ethical dimensions. Historically, many different traditions around the world have principles and codes of ethical conduct that are harmonious with nonviolence. Unfortunately, it is not generally understood that these principles also have very clear, demonstrable, pragmatic dimensions.

Yet the distinction between ethics and effectiveness may be more illusory than real. The practice of abstaining from violence – or, more appropriately, of practising active nonviolence – has a very strong pragmatic rationale: it maximises the chances of a positive outcome. Of course, choosing the path of active nonviolence

As stated above, the word 'nonviolence' implies many things. This handbook is specifically about nonviolence in action – what nonviolence looks as a tool to challenge violence and oppression – which is why these principles are about 'active nonviolence'. For convenience, throughout the rest of the book, we'll just use the word 'nonviolence'.

in no way guarantees a positive outcome – at least in the short run – any more than choosing the path of violence does. Its only claim – based on everyday experience, not to mention a growing body of empirical evidence from the blood-soaked historical record – is that choosing active nonviolence is much more likely to produce a positive outcome, at least in the long run.

Seven interlocking principles of nonviolence

Here are seven inter-locking principles of active nonviolence that explain why nonviolence works.

1. Active nonviolence means choosing means that are consistent with our ends.

Opposing violence by employing violence ourselves simply adds to the sum total of violence. Even when violence appears to ‘succeed’ in the short run, in the long run it often leads to revenge and counter-violence, thus perpetuating the age-old ‘cycle of violence.’

2. Active nonviolence distinguishes between the act and the actor.

Resisting the temptation to dehumanise our opponents avoids making enemies unnecessarily. The more we show respect for other people as human beings – even when expressing our vehement opposition to what they do – the greater the likelihood of them changing their behaviour, or even joining us, such as when insiders become “whistle-blowers.”

3. Active nonviolence seeks inclusive solutions.

This principle does not mean compromising with injustice, exploitation, or violence, it simply means taking into consideration the legitimate needs of our opponents, trying to find ways to accommodate them without surrendering our own – or others’ – equally legitimate needs or objectives.

4. Active nonviolence rejects both retaliation and flight.

Refusing to flee or fight – the expected responses to conflict or violence – can cause our opponents to reassess the situation and reconsider their options. Standing our ground without returning violence for violence and without backing down, is the “third way” of active nonviolence.

5. Active nonviolence choose openness, transparency, and truthfulness.

This principle is not an absolute. Sometimes, secrecy may be necessary in order to safeguard the lives of others. In most situations however, secrecy and deceit are not only unnecessary, they are likely to have highly counter-productive consequences for our organisations, our work, and our relationships.

6. Active nonviolence transforms our anger, rather than lets it transform us.

‘Righteous anger’ in the face of violence, injustice, exploitation, brutality, and indifference is not only understandable, but healthy. The question is how we deal with our anger – through nonviolence we can transform our anger into a positive force for constructive action.

7. Active nonviolence exercises power by withdrawing cooperation.

The authority that power-holders wield is dependent on the continued cooperation of those whom they wield power over. When this cooperation is withdrawn – when people exercise their own power by refusing to cooperate – power-holders lose the source of their power, and the ‘powerless’ become empowered.

How can nonviolence strengthen a campaign?

Nonviolence strengthens a campaign in three main ways:

1. Among participants in a campaign.

By fostering trust and solidarity among participants, they usually are put in touch with the sources of their own power to act in the situation, facing their fears. Many people don't realise how creative they can be until they have the support of others in trying something new.

2. In relation to a campaign's adversary.

Nonviolence aims either to inhibit the violence of an adversary or to ensure that violent oppression will 'backfire' politically against them. Beyond that, it seeks to undermine an oppressive institution's 'pillars of power' (see 'pillars of power', <http://wri-irg.org/wiki/index.php/Pillars+of+Power>, p203 or 'spectrum of allies', <http://wri-irg.org/wiki/index.php/Spectrum+of+allies>, p208). For example, rather than treating employees of a corporate opponent as inanimate tools, nonviolence tries to create possibilities for them to rethink their allegiances.

The pioneer of nonviolent scholarship, Gene Sharp, has suggested four mechanisms of change in those opposing a nonviolent struggle:

- a) conversion: occasionally a campaign will persuade adversaries to adopt its point of view;
- b) coercion: sometimes a campaign can coerce adversaries to back down without convincing them of the activists' views of right and wrong;
- c) accommodation: when an adversary looks for some way to 'accommodate' a campaign, to make a concession without granting everything a campaign demands and without relinquishing power;
- d) disintegration: a mechanism Sharp added after 1989 when Soviet-aligned regimes had lost so much legitimacy and had so little capacity to renew themselves that, in the face of a 'people power' challenge, they disintegrated. (See 'forms of nonviolent action', p124). In relation to others not yet involved.

3. In relation to others not yet involved.

Nonviolence changes the quality of communication with bystanders or 'outsiders' – people not yet concerned about the issue or not yet active in a movement, or people who could be potential allies (see 'spectrum of allies' exercise, p208).

This handbook looks at the processes involved in building campaigns, in making issues alive and tangible, in designing campaign strategies, in taking action against violence and its causes, and in preparing and evaluating action. What we write is firmly grounded in the practice of social movements, and in particular our own experiences with the peace, antimilitarist, anti-nuclear, and social justice movements all over the world. This handbook has been written by and for activists.

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