



Role of Nonviolent Communication in Making Deeper Human Connections: A Case Study of training in Nakivale Refugee Camp, Uganda

Gervin Baila Kitwika

Nonviolent Forum, Isingiro District, Nakivale Refugee Camp, Uganda

Corresponding author: gervinbaila@gmail.com

Received: 19 Sept., 2023

Revised: 24 Nov., 2023

Accepted: 02 Dec., 2023

ABSTRACT

The number of international refugees across the world is in millions and are increasing every year. The migrants and refugees who have fled their respective countries have to live in challenging situations often leading to mental health issues, stress, trauma and feeling of hopelessness. In most refugee camps there are meagre resources, limited health care facilities and often scarcity of basic resources like water, sanitation etc. In such stressful situations, there is likelihood of a stressful or toxic communication ecosystem. It is like when an inmate in a refugee camp becomes much stressed then her/his communication is also affected. It is in this context, there is need to introduce a healthy communication ecosystem. This paper is a result of an action training in the Gandhian approach to nonviolent communication by the author of selected inmates of Nakhivale Refugee Camp in Uganda. It tries to establish that training in nonviolent communication helps to make deeper human connections and can contribute to healthier interactions amongst people.

Keyword: Nonviolent communication, human connections, Gandhian nonviolence

According to a World Health Organization Report (WHO), there were about 272 million international migrants in 2019. (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-and-forced-displacement>) This number is swelling every year with lakhs being forced out of their home countries due to complex conflicts. The WHO report points out on how the migrants and refugees are exposed to different types of stress factors. These starts right from the time when they are forced to abandon their homes and flee to an unknown country, the challenges they face during their migration journey and then their stay in refugee camps in the host country. Due to these stress conditions, many people who are forced to become refugees suffer

from mental disorders like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

There can variety of challenges in a refugee camp which ranges from issues of overcrowding due to limited availability of space to poor sanitation and hygiene facilities. Basic resources like clean drinking water reliable properly cooked food are always an issue which mostly refugees have to face. Due to stressful conditions and with little security around, there are likelihood of a refugee camp becoming

How to cite this article: Kitwika, G.B. (2023). Role of Nonviolent Communication in Making Deeper Human Connections: A Case Study of training in Nakivale Refugee Camp, Uganda. *Int. J. Peace, Edu. Dev.*, 11(02): 65-71.

Source of Support: None; Conflict of Interest: None



a breeding ground for a toxic communication ecosystem and violence. These are possible due to serious competition for water, limited resources, health etc.

This chapter focusses on Nakivale Refugee Camp, Uganda. Based in Isingiro District, South West Uganda, the Nakivale Refugee Camp was established in 1958. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Uganda, the majority of the refugees are from Congo; there are also refugees from other countries like Rwanda, Liberia, Ethiopia, Sudan, etc. According to the UNHCR, Nakivale is the eight largest refugee camp in the world; it is also the oldest refugee settlement in Africa. An UNHabitat and UNHCR report on Nakivale Settlement profile points out how the settlement 'benefits from what is often lauded as the most progressive refugee policies in the world'. (https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/08/200720_nakivale_settlement_profile_web.pdf)

In the context of the growing number of refugees in Uganda, the UNHabitat and UNHCR report also points out, "With the renewed conflict in three parallel emergencies from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Burundi in 2016 and 2017, resulting in an unprecedented spike in refugee numbers, doubling the refugee population. It has since become the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, with refugees making up 3.7% of the total population, and is also one of the largest hosting countries in the world." The report notes that the aim of the local government has been a 'continuation to uphold an inclusive approach, enhancing their self-reliance and supporting peaceful coexistence with the host communities'.

In the context of promoting peaceful coexistence and deeper human connections, the author has started a systematic action training programme in the Gandhian approach to nonviolent communication for people in the Nakivale Refugee Camp. This chapter is an attempt to capture the impact the training is making amongst the participants. To start with the author has trained 25 young people all of whom are Congolese. The training was conducted in French and Swahili over a period of four weeks.

Training in Nonviolent Communication

Mahatma Gandhi's ideas and perspectives on nonviolence resonates with peace workers and peace lovers all across the world. At a time when conflicts ravages across different parts of the world, the Mahatma's teachings for a society based on the principles of nonviolence, love and compassion holds great relevance. It is in this backdrop that it was felt that the Gandhian approach to nonviolence should be imbibed and nurtured amongst young people. This entails our communication too as it is an integral part of our lives and 'we cannot not communicate'. In a world now dominated by the digital forms of communication with the preponderance of the use of social media coupled with the rise of hate narratives and fake information, communicators across the world are challenged to facilitate a healthy communication ecosystem. It is in this backdrop training in nonviolent communication assumes importance.

With the aim to promote a communication ecosystem that is healthy and contributes to peaceful coexistence besides helping the refugees make deeper connections, the author started reading literature and texts on the practical use of nonviolent communication and some global best practices. In this context, after in-depth exploration of different training materials on the subject, the author discerned a resource material based on the Gandhian principles. It was a training material on nonviolent communication from the website of Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, India which was downloaded and used. The orientation course on nonviolent communication (Kundu, 2020) gives a simple and practical understanding of the different elements of nonviolent communication and how it can be used in our daily lives. The course also finds a link in the official page of the United Nations on the International Day of Nonviolence. (<https://www.un.org/en/observances/non-violence-day#:~:text=The%20International%20Day%20of%20Non,and%20strategy%20of%20non%2Dviolence>).

The translated version of the course in Swahili and French was used for training of 25 young people who volunteered to be trained first who in turn

are expected to train more youth. A convenience sampling method was used to bring together the 25 youth based on their previous work on promoting peaceful coexistence, and interests in nonviolent methods.

In the initial discussions with the youth which guided the selection of the training material based on Gandhian principles some of the key ideas of the Mahatma which are critical to be nurtured by communicators today found resonance with the youth group. The Mahatma had said, "My writings cannot but be free from hatred towards any individual because it is my firm belief that it is love that sustains the earth." (The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi). The youth felt that in contemporary times, the rise of the use of hate speech and hate narratives were detrimental to relationships between individuals and groups and it was a virus spreading all over the world.

Another important idea which reverberated amongst the youth group was the significance of restraint in our communication. Whether in our families, amongst friends, in institutions or in the society at large, it was felt that many individuals do not practice restraint in their communication. It is in this context, Gandhi becomes important as he says, "The reader can have no idea of the restraint I have to exercise from week to week in the choice of topics and my vocabulary. It is a training for me. It enables me to peep into myself and to make discoveries of my weaknesses. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh adjective. It is a terrible ordeal but a fine exercise to remove these weeds." (Young India, 2-7-1925) He also writes in his Autobiography, "I have naturally formed the habit of restraining my thoughts. And I can now give myself the certificate that a thoughtless word hardly ever escapes my tongue or pen. I do not recollect ever having had to regret anything in my speech or writing. I have thus been spared many a mishap and waste of time."

Further to start with the holistic nature of nonviolent communication was discussed at length. This entails not only the communication between human beings but also the symbolic form of our communication

with nature and other living beings. In this context, Kundu (2022a) describes nonviolent communication as a holistic communication approach which encompasses the entire gamut of our communicative efforts whether our intrapersonal communication, interpersonal, group, communication in the society at large and also our symbolic communication with nature and all other living beings.

As an initial exposition to the Gandhian approach to nonviolent communication, the group was told about the 5-pillars of Gandhian nonviolence. These have been aptly explained in the book of the Mahatma's grandson, Arun Gandhi (2017). These includes:

1. Respect,
2. Understanding,
3. Acceptance,
4. Appreciation, and
5. Compassion.

The youth were told about the interesting experiment of using Gandhian nonviolent communication in different countries. For Mishelia *et al.* (2022) discusses the impact of the training in Gandhian nonviolent communication of vigilante groups in Yobe state of Nigeria. They note, "The perceptible change in attitude and behavior of the vigilantes found as a result of the training in nonviolent communication underlines the importance of a sustained training program."

Mishelia *et al.* (2022) gives an in-depth insight of the experiences of about 270 junior vigilante officers which he and his team in Hope Interactive trained in Gandhian nonviolent communication. According to Mishelia *et al.*, the participants after the extensive training found new alternatives and perspectives on how conflicts could be resolved using nonviolent communication. The participants were able to acquire new strategies of resolving conflicts in their families, and in work. They felt that nonviolent communication was a powerful tool for greater engagement amongst individuals.

For instance, Mishelia *et al.* cited a vigilante officer, Zanna Kadiri who talked on how understanding Gandhian pillars of nonviolence 'helped him

identify his strength and weaknesses which carrying out his duties as a community vigilante’.

Talking on the essence of using the Gandhian pillars of nonviolence and nonviolent communication in the context of Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis, Obuyi (2021) argues on its adoption for addressing the conflict situation. Obuyi notes:

“Respect is one of such pillars, which essentially seeks to affirm the need for upholding human dignity and shying away from any tendencies that may jeopardize the same. Understanding, a good virtue that stems from the need to be considerate to each other views but also accommodating one another is an important aspect worth practice in the Ethiopia crisis. Excerpts from the forgone discussion have alluded to the lack acceptance and the absence of appreciation which are key ingredients to harmonious living and coexistence. Last, but not least would be the virtue of compassion; the act of kindness and love for one another are building blocks for lasting relationship. As a passionate player for peace and non-violent conflict resolution the author has huge sense of conviction that the pillars, as embedded in the five major virtues of humanity can be an important breakthrough towards the turmoil in Ethiopia.”

The use and training in Gandhian nonviolent communication in a conflict zone like Yemen has been encapsulated by Masood Siddhu (2022). Masood Siddhu studied the impact of the training in the attitudes and behaviors of young people amongst a selected group of youth in Yemen, a country which finds itself in a state of intrastate conflict. She, through a series of expert interviews and structured qualitative interviews of the participating youth, underlined on the importance of the use of nonviolent communication for constructive resolution of conflicts and transformation of relationships amongst the conflicting parties. Those who were interviewed felt that the traditional methods of dispute resolution in the Yemeni society can be strengthened with the integration of nonviolent communication which was based on the Gandhian approach.

As part of her study, Masood Sidhu (2022) also used the methodology of Expert Interviews.

For instance, she interviewed the local youth coordinator, Ayish Kodaf who advocated on the inherent need to introduce the five pillars of Gandhian nonviolence and the different elements of nonviolent communication amongst youth across the world, most importantly to those from the conflict zones. During the interview, he noted, “The youth in conflict zones are already overstressed due to the extremely toxic communication ecosystem in which they have to sustain, so to reduce the stress level and ensure harmonious relationships, exposure to nonviolent communication was critical. Gandhi’s nonviolent communication is a powerful antidote to the phenomenon of hate and violent communication gripping many parts of the world.”

The youth group was then apprised of the different elements of Gandhian nonviolent Communication. Kundu (2020 & 2022b) lists the different dimensions of Gandhian nonviolent communication:

1. The Gandhian model of nonviolent communication necessitates use of nonviolence in all aspects of communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, our thoughts and ideas. It underlines how the mind, heart, and body remain disciplined at every stage.
2. We learn the art and science of nonviolent persuasion and efficacy from the Gandhian approach. It explains how nonviolent persuasion is a key component of a nonviolent communication ecosystem.
3. The Gandhian model teaches us the significance of self-discipline and self-restraint in all aspects of our communicative efforts.
4. Gandhi’s nonviolent nonverbal symbolism, like fasting, tells us about its efficacy in nonviolent action. We learn how nonverbal symbolism aims at encouraging self-introspection.
5. The Gandhian approach to empathy in nonviolent communication teaches us how to emotionally connect with the people, even the adversaries, and build bridges.
6. The Gandhian nonviolent communication model encompasses principles of human interdependence and its relevance in a holistic communication ecosystem. It talks on the

importance of the cosmocentric approach to human nature.

7. Mahatma Gandhi's communication strategy was to reach the hearts of the masses through constructive work for social and economic emancipation. For instance, his *Talisman* is a powerful statement about how each needs to introspect on what they are doing for the last person of the society. It underscores the essence of empathetic connections.
8. Mahatma Gandhi's five pillars of nonviolence- respect, understanding, acceptance, appreciation, and compassion - can be considered the foundational architecture of a nonviolent communication ecosystem.
9. The Gandhian model of nonviolent communication entails the evolution of an individual to a higher plane of values and ethics and respect for human dignity.
10. His communication model underlines the importance of being morally disciplined, strictly adhering to the principles of ahimsa and truth.
11. Openness and flexibility were the hallmarks of Gandhian nonviolent communication. These attributes are important for the constructive resolution of any conflict.
12. Using the strategies of Gandhian nonviolent communication enables communicators to avoid getting into the trap of misrepresentation, fake information, and wrong stereotype

Discussion on the Action Training programme on Nonviolent Communication

An important take-away from the month long training in nonviolent communication and the subsequent impact analysis through a structured questionnaire amongst the participants underlined how the nurturing of this aspect of holistic communication helped individuals in making deeper and empathetic connections. As participants like Esther Metenda and Rosette Elodie pointed out that using the tools and strategies of nonviolent communication enabled them to control their emotions in a more positive way and improved their listening skills, they were able to make deeper

connections with others. In this context, Jeannette Wamunzila said, "The training has helped me a lot because before I was not in the habit of listening people fully when they were talking to me, I would interrupt frequently and would become fidgety. But now I have understood that I need to let others finish their talk before I can reply to them. Nonviolent communication has helped me to be a patient listener. It definitely helps in making deeper connections with others.

Another participant who shared similar perspective was Zigashane Kameya. He said as nonviolent communication helps them to actively use empathy, kindness, gratitude and compassion in their communicative efforts, it draws individuals closer to their kith and kin, friends and others in the community.

Another important take-away is how participants are now learning to control their emotions, not over-react and use nonviolent communication in resolving their daily conflicts. For instance, Jeannette Wamunzila shared her own experience of getting into difficult arguments with her husband after he came back home from work. It was leading to unnecessary tensions and conflicts in the family which also impacted their relationship. She pointed out the month-long training has helped her to understand her husband's emotions and control herself when there is tension in the house. This has helped in managing conflicts positively, she added.

In consonance with Wamunzila's perspectives was Rosette Nyamutema. She felt the 5-pillars of nonviolence if practiced with sincerity can help in positive resolution of any conflicts- whether in homes, and institutions. These can provide durable solutions to any conflicts, she stressed. She said she is now trying to use nonviolent communication in all her conversation as a habit. Zigashane Kameya observed the use of nonviolent communication helps individuals to evoke the spirit of love, it helps individuals to learn the art of forgiveness; these in turn are effective pillars for resolution of conflicts. This perspective of nonviolent communication as a pillar for individuals to learn about forgiveness and reconciliation was captured by another participant,

John Fikri said as he is now trying to practice compassion in both his listening and conversations, he is not only able to understand other's problems but also actively finding ways to help such individuals.

Further, Babu Jungeza gave an expansive understanding of how he intends to motivate other people in Nakhivale to nurture nonviolent communication. He said unless those who were part of the training themselves used nonviolent communication in all their conversations at all time, it would be difficult to motivate others to adopt it as their communication style. "First, I must use the elements of nonviolent communication like nonviolence in our speech and action, empathy, kindness and compassion when I am communicating with others. Only when people see the impact and the change I am able to bring in my own communication, others will be motivated to use it. They should be able see the difference nonviolent communication can make in our relationships, connections and how it can contribute to our co-existence."

Yvette Mapendo shared her own experience of the training of nonviolent communication. She said previously she would get irritated when someone asked her questions. "Many times I would get embarrassed and even angry on someone raising difficult questions. My behavior with such individuals was not cordial. This did not allow me to develop deeper connections with people. I would many times storm out of such discussions when someone asked me questions. But one month has passed since I took the training in nonviolent communication. Now I am able to control my anger, do not overreact, and remain calm. I am not getting irritated unnecessarily and able to respond to questions in a calmer way."

Mapendo said she is working hard to motivate her peers to also practice nonviolent communication. The important elements she tries to assimilate in her communicative efforts are openness, love, kindness, and compassion. She said her aim ever since she underwent the training was to practice self-restraint and use of positive language. This

was important to build-bridges even if we have differences of opinion with people, she added. In fact all the participants observed that their efforts have been to practice self-restraint. Also participants like Rosette Nyamutema said they were already feeling the impact of using positive language in their daily lives as it was improving their relationships and connections with others.

CONCLUSION

The impact analysis of the month-long action training in nonviolent communication revealed the significance of making it part of our communication ecosystem and how it contributed to making deeper connections. The 5-pillar of Gandhian nonviolence was the basic framework for all to follow in a nonviolent communication ecosystem. As Mahatma Gandhi had underlined the importance of self-restraint and not to overreact in anger or malice, use of nonviolent communication it was revealed in the study involved use of positive language which helped in keeping one's emotions in control and bridge-building.

The positivity promoted through use of nonviolent communication has motivated the participants to form a group to further train other young people in Nakhivale Refugee Camp.

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