

According to Gandhi, nonviolent social change requires building a new society in the shell of the old, which he called 'constructive programme'. 'Nonviolence for Gandhi was more than just a technique of struggle or a strategy for resisting military aggression,' Robert Burrowes explains in 'The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach'. Rather, 'it was intimately related to the wider struggle for social justice, economic self-reliance, and ecological harmony as well as the quest for self-realisation.' As Burrowes describes it:

*'For the individual, constructive programme meant increased power-from-within through the development of personal identity, self-reliance, and fearlessness. For the community, it meant the creation of a new set of political, social, and economic relations'.*

In cases where political revolutions have taken place but the population was not organised to exercise self-determination, creating a new society has been extremely difficult, and a new dictatorship usurping power has too often resulted.

Gandhi posited three elements needed for social transformation: personal transformation, political action, and **constructive programme**. He saw them as intertwined, all equally necessary to achieve social change.

## Components of a constructive programme

The different components that constructive programmes try to incorporate into their work are equality, liberatory education, economic self-reliance, and a clean environment. Be careful though; just because an activity appears to fully address one of these, it does not mean that activity equates to being a constructive programme. Just because a large, multinational corporation sells fairtrade coffee in its shops does not mean that we would consider their work a constructive programme focusing on economic self-reliance for the farmers! The structural violence of the economic system is not being addressed through such work; if anything, farmers have become that bit more reliant on oppressive structures. Constructive programme is an element of nonviolent social change, and should therefore be based on [nonviolent principles](#).

The Instituto de Permacultura de El Salvador (IPES - <http://permacultura.com.sv/>) is an example of how all four components of a constructive programme can be put into practice. IPES teaches campesino (subsistence farmers) communities in El Salvador how to grow crops to the rigorously environmentally sustainable model of permaculture. The four components are described below, followed by an example of how IPES' work promotes equality, is educational, develops economic self-reliance and encourages effective work for the environment.

### Equality

For Gandhi, equality meant creating ashrams, political campaigns, and cooperative enterprises across social divides. These would cut through communal and religious lines, gender inequality, and caste distinctions—especially 'untouchability'—and include members of the 'hill tribes' and people suffering from leprosy.

Working for equality means overcoming oppression and structural [violence](#).

IPES trains campesinos, supporting those with relatively little social power to become more self-reliant. The training IPES gives is in liberatory permaculture techniques, and the skills to act as permaculture leaders when they return home. Trainees are encouraged to practice and learn from one another, and local leaders are organised in associations, giving them a collective voice in development strategies; this helps them gain support, and advocate for sustainable and living practises with the government and NGO's.

## Education

Gandhi began education projects; literacy campaigns to promote basic reading and maths skills, political education, knowledge about health, and nonviolence training for students.

Paulo Friere's 'conscientisation' or '[popular education](#)' approach is an example of how education can offer a community radical insight into the structural conditions that uphold the problems they face, and the article by [Nepalese land reform activists](#) also exemplifies this approach.

IPES' work focuses on training permanent leaders. In particular, they use a farmer methodology that relies on trainees sharing knowledge with their community where they live at home, and demonstrating what they have learned in their community. IPES puts a particular emphasis on training young people.

Alongside learning practical skills in a participatory manner (trainings are designed to be accessible to people with very low levels of literacy), participants look at the structural conditions they face nationally and internationally that have led to the food crisis in the context of climate change. This includes gaining a historical awareness of the legacy of colonialism.

## Economic self-reliance

Gandhi's economic self-reliance campaigns involved, most famously, spinning homemade cloth (khadi), which was done throughout India. A constructive programme that was often done collectively, it was also a campaign of non-cooperation with Indians' systematic dependency on the British for cloth. Economic self-reliance also involved diversifying crops, creating village industries, and developing labour unions.

Democratically run worker cooperatives are examples of economic self-reliance.

Since 1945, many Salvadorian governments have promoted high intensity 'green revolution' techniques, reliant on agrochemicals and expensive, 'single-use' seed. Farmers are dependent on a very unsustainable farming system which is very economically volatile, and their prices will fluctuate year to year. The permaculture methods encouraged by IPES are based on local systems to develop inter-reliant agriculture systems that promote seed-sharing schemes, so that farmers are able to become more self-reliant, and produce a range of produce. IPES encourages local markets, so local people can sell surplus rather than relying on imported food from Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and the USA.

## Environmental efforts

Environmental efforts involved the whole community in village sanitation, which meant, for Hindus, overtly flouting caste norms. Throughout the world, constructive programmes have focussed explicitly on environmental concerns, through community supported energy production schemes, local food production and farming, and recycling projects.

As in many cases, the poorest and most vulnerable in El Salvador have felt the impact of climate change first. IPES teaches permaculture techniques that help farmers to develop biodiversity, improve soil conditions using techniques that do not need harmful chemicals or seed bought from corporations. Permaculture methods include village sanitation through the use of compost, and rainwater is harvested for drinking and irrigation. The use of local and natural materials is encouraged.

The process of working on a constructive programme has fundamental benefits, the first of which is providing immediate assistance to those in greatest need – a constructive programme should be meeting a particular, concrete need for a community. As people come together in community - not individual- action, they build

constituencies for social change. Gandhi saw constructive programme as training for civil disobedience, which often included non-cooperation. Constructive work provides opportunities to develop the skills needed to build a new society.

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