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Why are you interested in a Handbook on nonviolent campaigns? Probably because you want to make something happen, or perhaps because you want to stop something from happening. Perhaps you sense that nonviolence can offer an alternative to actions that generate hostility and ultimately prove sterile, at least from the point of view of making social change. Perhaps you just want to try something different or get some tips to improve the way your group is already organising actions and campaigns.

In this Handbook, our basic, working definition of nonviolence is based on a desire to end violence — be it physical violence or what's been called 'structural violence' (deprivation, social exclusion, and oppression)—without committing further violence. This is not a definitive description, as other, more eloquent, more philosophical, more time-specific (e.g., that meant a lot in a certain time and place), and personal, rather poetic, definitions exist.



Nonviolence can imply much more than this basic definition, 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 or theory of social action. 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 practise nonviolence as a way of life. There is a spectrum here, with many somewhere in between. Such differences may surface during a campaign, but usually a statement of principles or guidelines specific to a particular campaign (see '[Principles of Nonviolent Action](#)' and '[Nonviolent Guidelines](#)') can accommodate people with attitudes across this spectrum.

Certain differences in understanding, however, can be a source of friction in a campaign and need to be brought into the open. For instance, some argue that the methods of nonviolence should be deployed in order to wage a conflict and win; others argue that a key nonviolent attitude is to seek a solution that will include those who today are adversaries. What is essential when a difference such as this occurs is not that campaigners debate basic attitudes, but that they reach agreements on the points that affect the campaign. This particular example (when some seek to 'win' and others seek an inclusive solution) would influence the demands and negotiating strategy the activists engaging in the campaign draw up.

The question of damage to property can be divisive. Some nonviolent activists seek to avoid damage to property while others believe that damaging property is a cost worth inflicting on an opponent. In Section Three, we discuss the value of campaign or action guidelines. Attitudes on a subject like property damage might need to be debated in drawing up such guidelines. Such discussion should not be delayed until an action is underway. For some people, nonviolent action means avoiding hostile behaviour towards adversaries, perhaps even 'seeking that of good in everyone', while other nonviolent activists might seek to 'shame' an adversary, or to brand them as 'war criminals' or 'torturers', 'racists', or 'corrupt'. The issue of shouting names or terms of abuse might well be covered in the guidelines for an action, but the underlying

differences and the possible combinations of attitudes can be discussed in much greater depth by the kind of 'affinity groups' discussed in the section on preparing for nonviolent action (see '[Affinity Groups](#)'). Such groups aim to be a 'safe space' for disclosing doubts, but also for mutual learning. Affinity group members can take a phrase commonly associated with nonviolent action—such as 'speaking truth to power'—and each explain what it means for her or him and what issues it raises, sharing insights and deepening each other's understanding of what they are trying to do together.

A common attitude of nonviolent activists is that we want our activities to be an expression of the future we are trying to create: this might be embodied in what Mohandas Gandhi called constructive programme (see “[Constructive Programme](#)”), but also in the idea of we/the movement 'being peace', that 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.

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