Non-Violent Communication in Global Policy Making

The Red Elephant Foundation, March 2017 | Anando Ghosh and Rachel Nduta

Introduction
The concept of ‘Non-Violent Communication’ was devised by an American psychologist named Marshall Rosenberg to align his work with those of other activists working in the domain of non-violence. NVC is founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions.1 Rosenberg uses the term ‘non-violence’ as Gandhi did to refer to our natural state of compassion when violence has subsided from the heart. As per a survey by the World Bank in 1999, 60000 people living on less than a dollar per day revealed that access to a voice made the greatest difference to their lives.2 This need for a voice was far more important than the need for food and shelter. True, the need to express ourselves and be heard that is to have a voice, is fundamental to all human beings. Yet, there are voices that continue to create and perpetuate violence or give birth to conflicts. These voices express judgements, stereotypes and accusations. Often, the use of such a manipulative language induces fear, guilt and shame. This led Marshall Rosenberg to unpeel the violence provoking aspects of language and uncover a language of needs and feelings where one feels humanly connected with the immediate needs of the other thus restoring trust in people and life. What is more surprising is the fact that it doesn’t take two people to make this possible. Once this chain begins, everyone learns to shift his/her attention to needs—safety, love, respect, justice etc. even at the cost of raising the voice. There is certainly a difference in yelling out blames and yelling out needs, feelings and requests. Non-violent communication is a heart-based concept—everyone can hear when someone speaks from the heart no matter the volume.

Non-Violence in the Context of Communication
The consciousness for ‘Non-Violent Communication’ is on the rise and is being talked about lately in bedrooms, classrooms, prisons, boardrooms and mediation centres. The “Non-violence” in communication is aimed at building a vocabulary that makes a transition from the habitual communication of competition, judgement, demand and diagnosis to a communication of needs and feelings. Thus, non-violence in the context of communication assumes that all human beings are born-compassionates and a violent behaviour is actually a learned culture and that behind every human action is a basic unmet human need that somehow fails to get itself communicated through proper channels to the concerned people across.

By digging deeper beneath the surface of problems, Non Violent Communication (NVC) tries to reach the root of violence, pain and conflict to help reduce hostility, heal trauma and strengthen relationships.3 Rather than focusing on what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’, it encourages the habit of patiently ‘listening’ and clearly ‘expressing’ to create an atmosphere of trust and cooperation. Needless to say, spiritual values form its core re-iterating the need for personal empowerment through a ‘power-within’ strategy. The essence of non-violence lies in consciousness and it is possible to apply its principles in communication even without uttering a single word.

Key Elements of Non-Violent Communication
1. Observation-
Observation in the context of NVC refers to carefully using the senses (sight, hearing, touch) to see, hear, remember and imagine what people around us are doing without evaluating their actions. The key to making an observation is to separate our own judgments, evaluations or interpretations from our description of what happened. Learning to translate judgments and interpretations into observation language moves us away
2. Feelings
Feelings refer to the emotions or sensations that are free of thoughts that either judge or criticize others. They must convey the needs that are either met or unmet. Feelings allow us to take responsibility for our own experiences without shifting the blame on somebody. This makes room for a conversation where the other party is more likely to respond after hearing what matters to us rather than a typical blame game where he or she is blamed or criticized or made to feel humiliated.

3. Needs
Needs are connected to the feelings identified. As per NVC, needs refer to our core values and deepest human longings. When we try connecting with our needs, we focus on shared human experiences rather than on strategies that meet these needs- a person, a location, an action, a time, or an object. NVC postulates that our needs are never in conflict. Conflicts arise when strategies for meeting these needs clash.

4. Requests
A request is different from a demand. The consequence of hearing a ‘no’ in case of demands is often punitive whereas it furthers dialogue in case of requests. Requests in the NVC terminology are aimed at improving the quality of connection between two individuals. If requests are accepted out of guilt, fear or shame, the quality of trust is certainly staked. When we make clear requests, it is not certain that they may be accepted at the spur of the moment but in the process of making clear requests, we sow the seeds of everlasting trust and cooperation. Considered the most difficult of all the components, requests should not be aimed at asking individuals ‘what not to do’ or ‘how to do’ a particular thing but simply on ‘what to do’.

Process of Non-Violent Communication
The process of non-violent communication can be used while interacting with ourselves and others and hence and be easily applied in diverse situations such as schools, organizations and institutions, therapy and counselling, diplomatic and business negotiations, disputes and conflicts of any nature, intimate relationships and families. Though NVC is referred to as a ‘process’ or ‘language’, it does not consist of a prescribed formula but adapts to various situations and cultural styles. However, an NVC process can be loosely stated to be three dimensional. Self-empathy, honestly expressing and empathetically receiving form its three legs.

1. Self-Empathy- Self empathy involves compassionately connecting with the inner self and identifying our thoughts, judgements, feelings and needs without blame or criticism. This inner awareness and clarity paves way for the next steps- ‘expressing’ and ‘receiving’. Self-empathy helps resolve inner conflicts and transforms the experience of life.

2. Honestly expressing- This step involves clearly and honestly expressing our observations, feelings, needs and requests to others. This way, an observation sets the context, feelings support connection and getting out of our heads, needs support connection and identify what is important, and a request clarifies what sort of response you might enjoy.

3. Empathetically receiving- This step involves the use of the same four components- observation, feelings, needs and requests in the form of a question so as to empathetically connect with the other person.
Empathetically connecting with the other person meets our own needs of understanding, connection and contribution at the same allowing the other person to honestly express his/ her needs.

Once we express ourselves honestly and encourage others to do likewise, we establish a flow of communication until compassion manifests naturally to enrich our lives.

**Incorporating Non Violent Communication in Policy Making**

Nonviolent communication seeks to bring about social or political change and it entails dozens of specific methods of protests, non-cooperation and intervention without employing physical violence. (Sharp 1973, 64) In a more logical aspect of NVC, language choices can either be transformative or destructive. Thus, it is imperative to set clear expectations of every project and objective to ensure that the needs of everyone are met effectively.

**How then can we integrate NVC in policy making?**

Since being developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the early 1960s, the concept of NVC has constantly evolved and continues to be applied in various contexts. In the framework of global policy making, NVC can be embraced in various ways:

- **Creating change** – NVC can be applied to effect sustainable change by creating a culture of peace, a new generation of leaders and an efficient workforce.

- **Empowered peace activism** – The ripple effect of successful peace activism is such that social transformation is realised from a place of understanding and compassion rather than fear thereby reducing violence by addressing its root causes and unmet needs.

- **Conflict resolution** – The mediation facet of NVC expands the capacity to contribute to the reconciliation and healing of conflict. NVC can be embraced as a tool to resolve conflicts effectively and meaningfully, transform criticism and blame as well as prevent future misunderstandings.

- **International negotiation** – The bargaining strategies and subsequent improved cooperation between states is largely shaped by the participants’ ability to negotiate successfully and reach agreements. This can be hugely influenced by integrating nonviolent communication principles in the negotiation processes.

- **Education** – Trainings and research initiatives provide focus on nonviolent communication to communities, schools, organizations, groups or individuals working towards social or cultural transformation

- **Organizational effectiveness** – Closer home, NVC improves teamwork and productivity, this in turn translates to sound policy making within organizations which overall contribute to social development.

**Practicality of NVC**

The clear and effective process of NVC makes it an easy concept to grasp as well adapt. In simple terms, it encourages less resistance and more cooperation. While it is not nearly enough to emphasize the benefits of employing a nonviolent communication approach in policy making, it is important to note that it requires a radical shift in consciousness. NVC is a dialogue process aimed at a particular form of consensus; solutions to meet both parties’ needs. This form of dialogue requires a deep trust that people enjoy giving freely and an abiding commitment to attend to the needs of others.

**Conclusion**

Incorporating the key elements of nonviolent communication is as imperative as a specific oriented approach. In this sense, discovering strategies that work for everyone without risking violence, nonviolent communication offers a deliberate yet collaborative effort towards transforming the society, policies and
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Institutions. In conclusion, ‘nonviolent communication shows us a way of being very honest, without any criticism, insults or put-downs, and without any intellectual diagnosis, implying wrongness.’ (Marshall B. Rosenberg)

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