



Transformational Effect of Training in Nonviolent Communication: A Case Study of Training of Vigilante Groups in Yobe State, Northeast Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Vigilantes in Nigeria are known to compliment the work of security agencies. They are widely spread across the state and have contributed enormously to stability in many communities, local government areas, and the state. They vary in organizational structure and have names based on location and context. In places where there are no formal state actors (security), the vigilante, in collaboration with community leaders, forms a structure of policing within the community to maintain law and order. Over the years, with the rise in an insurgency, the relevance of vigilantes has become more pronounced, and they support security operatives during formal engagements. The knowledge and the practical understanding that the vigilantes possess help in finding a solution to many complex problems. As they support community safety, there are often gaps in how the vigilantes relate to or respond to security matters within the community since most of them do not have formal training before joining the vigilante group. In this context, training in peace-building and conflict de-escalation is essential. In this backdrop, this paper explores the transformational effect of training vigilantes in the Gandhian model of nonviolent communication. It captures the impact of a sustained training program organized for vigilantes in Yobe, north-eastern Nigeria.

Keywords: Nonviolent communication, vigilante, Gandhian model of nonviolent communication, Local Government Area (LGA), conflict de-escalation

Yobe state is located in north-eastern Nigeria and shares borders with the Republic of Niger to the north and the Nigerian states of Borno to the east, Gombe to the south-west, Bauchi to the west, and Jigawa to the northwest. Damaturu is the state capital, while Geidam, Potiskum, and Gashua are sizable market towns. The state is served by trunk roads connecting Potiskum, Damaturu, and Maiduguri (in Borno state) in its central part. It has a population of about 2,321,591 according to the 2006 population census.

Yobe state has 17 Local Government Areas (LGAs), which are divided into three senatorial districts/ Zones: Zone A (Damaturu, Gulani, Gujba, Geidam, Tarmuwa, Bursari, Yunusari, and Yusufari), Zone B (Potiskum, Fika, Nangereand Fune), Zone C (Nguru, Bade, Karasuwa, Jakusko, and Machina). Most

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visible tribes include Kanuri, Karai-Karai, Ngizim, Ngamo, Hausa, Fulani, Bolewa, Bura, and Manga.

Nigeria has a long history of having vigilante groups. They have been there not only during civilian rule but also during periods when there have been military governments. For instance, they were there during the military dictatorship of Generals Babangida, Abacha, and Abubakar. Traditionally, the vigilantes have been seen as an extension of the work of law enforcement officers. Nigeria can be said to have high levels of delinquency. Also, a significant challenge is the severe lack of training of police personnel. There are inadequate equipment and personnel.

An Amnesty International report (2002) talking about the phenomenon of vigilantes in Nigeria shares the different forms of vigilantes in the country. It notes, "For instance, in south-eastern Nigeria there traditionally existed groups commonly known as "Ndinche", community guards formed by volunteers in villages who would bring suspected criminals to the community council, often called "Amala", and then display them in front of the village to their shame before being handed over to the police."

The report talks about how from the late 1980s and almost the whole of the 1990s, the military governments established anti-crime squads, which included soldiers, policemen, and vigilante groups. These vigilante groups were mostly comprised of armed civilians. However, this starkly contrasted to the traditional concept of vigilante in Nigeria. The whole grounding of the vigilante concept in Nigerian society was how unarmed voluntary citizen groups were created in local communities to aid and help security forces. The aim was to help the security forces handle common criminality and social violence. The vigilantes are also expected to arrest suspected delinquents and hand them over to the police. If we look at the law in Nigeria, it provides recognition to vigilante groups arresting suspected criminals if they are unarmed and the suspect is immediately handed over to the police.

According to the Amnesty Report, a major fall-out in the post-military regime has been the increasing

incidence of crime. This has paved a fertile ground for the proliferation of 'heavily armed vigilante groups of various conditions and interests in nearly every corner of Nigeria'.

Meanwhile, Badiora (2022), talking about the history of vigilantism in Nigeria notes, "In the Yoruba-speaking south-west, crime-fighting has been led by the O'odua People's Congress; in the eastern states by the Bakassi Boys; and across the north by Shari'a implementation committees or Hisba".

Badiora talks about two ways of approaching the phenomenon of vigilantism. There was one approach where community and self-help policing groups protected the public through different law enforcement styles of policing. The other approach can be described as violent vigilantism as it took the form of extra-judicial killing as which meant the killing of people by groups of citizens without having the authority of government.

In his study of vigilantes, Bandiora found that most people felt on the need of vigilantes' to acknowledge 'the basic dignity and rights of citizens. His study underlined the need of vigilantes to make all their decisions 'in a neutral and objective way'. The study findings stressed that all cost vigilantes should avoid all kinds of brutal and violent methods of dealing with offenders. His findings also suggest, "The government should devise performance guidelines and supervisory mechanisms for vigilantism or non-state institutions wherever they exist." The study underscored the urgent need to develop frameworks of policing standards that could guide the performance of vigilantes, develop standardized procedures, and define the jurisdictions and the type of interventions they can make.

Bandiora's study points out, "If procedural justice were to be used in dealing with the public, support for and satisfaction with vigilantes could become widespread in the society."

The authors as part of an initiative to strengthen the functioning of vigilantes by Hope Interactive in collaboration with the Conciliation Resources (UK) have mapped vigilante groups in Yobe state. It was found that these included:

1. Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) - Armed;
 - ⊙ State Level (Coordinated by State Government).
 - ⊙ LGA Level (Coordinated by Local Government).
2. Hunters Group (Armed).
3. War Against Indiscipline (WAI) Brigade (Unarmed).

During the mapping exercise and in the context of Bandiora's study, it was found that vigilantes' need to be exposed to capacity-building programs where they can assimilate the principles of procedural justice, understand the importance of human dignity and human rights, approach disputes through a nonviolent way and engage the community at large to be more effective. It was found that for greater effectiveness, vigilantes' should be given training in nonviolent communication to engage with the public at large. It was also found that poor communication have been a major factor creating a gap between vigilante and community members, as they play a vital role in conflict resolution in most societies. In this context, it was felt that training in nonviolent communication could be an effective strategy for delivering procedural justice and upholding the citizenry's dignity.

It is in this backdrop that Hope Interactive conducted a series of capacity-building training of vigilantes in nonviolent communication. The first round of training in nonviolent communication was at the state level, where vigilante officials (leaders) were taught the concept of nonviolent communication, its various dimensions, and elements. To broaden the coverage across the local government areas (LGAs), five LGAs were selected for the first round of training. Besides, nine communities from the local government areas (LGA) were also included. These included: Gujba LGA (Kasatchiya and Railway communities), Damaturu LGA (Ajari and Pompomari communities), Fune LGA (Dogo Kuka and Daura communities), Potiskum LGA (Sabon Tasha community), Gaidam LGA (Anguwam Kwari and Kasuwam Shanu communities). In each community, 30 vigilantes took part in the training making a total of 270 junior officers in

nine communities across five LGAs. The training methodology used for the community level training was the same as that of the state level. The training was simplified for the junior officers as their educational qualifications and experience were a bit lower than their senior officials. At the state-level training, the senior officers were encouraged to contribute to the training process during the training of junior vigilante officers. This was to ensure the sustainability of nonviolent communication training and a sense of ownership among the senior officers.

To understand the impact of the training programme, a feedback system was developed. After 15 days of the training, the participants were asked how they could use the different elements of nonviolent communication in their work.

This chapter will study the transformational effect of the training programme on nonviolent communication amongst vigilantes'. Essentially the Gandhian approach to nonviolent communication was used for the training purpose.

Training in Nonviolent Communication

During the training, senior Gandhian, Natwar Thakkar's explanation on what is nonviolent communication was used. Thakkar used the Gandhian communication praxis to share his understanding of nonviolent communication. Thakkar notes (Kundu, 2018 & 2022):

To me nonviolent communication literacy would mean how our communication efforts should be nonviolent; how our ability and capacity to communicate not only with ourselves but with our family and society be nonviolent in all aspects and overall, how the entire process of communication whether between individuals, groups, communities and the world at large should be nonviolent in nature. This would entail deep understanding of the art and science of non-violence and its centrality in all our daily actions. It's not just verbal and nonverbal communication, nonviolent communication literacy would also include whether our thoughts and ideas are nonviolent or not. This would also mean how we can rid of our preconceived notions of individuals or groups with whom we want to communicate and stop

evaluating them to suit our own ideas. More than often, we are attuned to think in terms of moralistic judgments which may be our own constructions. By developing deep understanding of the art and science of non-violence and integrating it in our communication practices we could get over with biased and moralistic judgments; this in turn could contribute to emotional bridge building.

Thakkar (Kundu, 2018) further expressed the significance of assimilation of nonviolent communication in our societies at large, noted, "I firmly believe that by practicing nonviolent communication, there can be amazing opportunities to promote goodness in our world which keeps on getting struck with conflicts. It is an essential part of efforts to evolve a culture of peace and non-violence not just in our homes but in the entire world. This is also an antidote to all acts of revenge, aggression, and retaliation as all these arises from a breakdown in communication or our reliance on violence in communication."

This aspect of nonviolent communication was discussed with the participants at length, and how each one of us can promote goodness in communities around us. In-depth discussions were also taken up on how nonviolent communication offered an antidote to situations of aggression and violence in the context of the work of the vigilantes. The five pillars of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence, which form the foundation of nonviolent communication, were shared with the participants. (Kundu, 2020; Kundu & Sinha, 2021). The five pillars of Gandhi's non-violence have been enumerated in the book of the Mahatma's grandson, Arun Gandhi (2017). These included:

- ⊙ Respect
- ⊙ Understanding
- ⊙ Acceptance
- ⊙ Appreciation
- ⊙ Compassion

Arun Gandhi (2017) beautifully explains the five pillars of non-violence:

Respecting and understanding other people, whatever their religion, race, caste, or country, is the only

way the world can progress. Putting up walls and divisions always backfires, leading to anger, rebellion, and violence. In contrast, when we respect and understand each other, we naturally evolve to that third pillar, acceptance. Accepting other views and positions allows us to grow stronger and wiser. The other two pillars of nonviolence-appreciation and compassion- help bring about personal happiness and fulfillment and greater harmony in the world.

During the training program, it was underscored that individuals must practice non-violence as only then can we promote a nonviolent society. If individuals show violent behavior and not respect procedural justice, vigilantes cannot contribute to a nonviolent society. Gandhi had so rightly said, "I am an irrepressible optimist. My optimism rests on my belief in the infinite possibilities of the individual to develop non-violence. The more you develop it in your being, the more infectious it becomes till it overwhelms your surroundings and by and by might over sweep the world" (*Harijan*, 28-1-1939, p 443).

The participants were introduced to the centrality of nonviolent communication and how it was a holistic communication system (Kundu, 2022). The role of nonviolent communication in nurturing a healthy communication ecosystem, whether in the individual level, families, institutions, and society at large, were discussed. During the training program, all the elements of nonviolent communication were discussed with the participants. Using case study method and simulation exercises, the participants were taken on a journey to explore how they could use each of these elements during their work. The orientation course on nonviolent communication developed by Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, India (Kundu, 2020) and Exploring Nonviolent Communication (Kundu & Sinha, 2021) were used as training materials for the participants. The training materials were first translated into the Hausa language to enable easy facilitation. The languages of training were Hausa and Kanuri (Kanuri was occasionally used as most of the participants understand Hausa).

The different elements of nonviolent communication that were discussed with the participants include (Kundu & Sinha, 2021):

- ⊙ Nonviolent communication means a complete lack of violence in the way we communicate with others.
- ⊙ Constructive Intrapersonal Communication - our Self Talk and Inner Dialogue.
- ⊙ Nurturing deep faith in principles of humanism.
- ⊙ Use of Appropriate and Positive Language.
- ⊙ Expansion of our emotional vocabulary and managing emotions during our process of communication.
- ⊙ Avoiding stereotypes in our communication efforts.
- ⊙ Avoid Moralistic Judgments.
- ⊙ Avoid Evaluative Language.
- ⊙ Role of mutual respect in communication.
- ⊙ The Power of Empathy.
- ⊙ Strong belief in the power of compassion.
- ⊙ Connecting with the needs of others.
- ⊙ Importance of flexibility and openness in our communication.
- ⊙ Practicing active and deep listening skills.
- ⊙ Expressing gratitude.

In each of the training sessions, the participants were exposed to different situations where the vigilantes could find themselves during the course of their work. They were then motivated to reflect on how they could use some of these elements of nonviolent communication; in fact, they use the strategies of nonviolent communication in their work as vigilantes. There was extensive use of role plays and simulation exercises to develop a greater understanding of nonviolent communication and its use.

There was greater acceptability of the training materials that were used as the elements and pillars of nonviolent communication enumerated in the literature correlated with the fundamental cultural and religious beliefs of the participation. This aided their acceptance and assimilation of the concept and framework of nonviolent communication as most of

the Holy Scriptures encouraged the practice of the five pillars of Gandhi's non-violence.

Impact of the training programme

An important takeaway from the training programs was the underlining of the need for regular training in nonviolent communication and its assimilation into everyday life. Most of the trainees underscored the need for more in-depth exposure to the values and ethics in communication which nonviolent communication presented were critical for harmonious co-existence.

A critical dimension that the training programs highlighted was the nonviolent alternatives to the resolution of conflicts instead of violent alternatives. For the trainees, it was an eye opener that they could also contribute to resolving conflicts through nonviolent means.

For instance, Abubakar Sodangi pointed out, "So far, the only language I understood as a vigilante was inflicting injuries on suspects without thorough investigation. I believed all suspects were bad people. So my usual method was to beat them into a stupor before taking them to the police station or appropriate authorities as the case may be. The training in nonviolent communication opened my eyes to see possibility in every impossibility due the knowledge gained. I learned the act of proper communication and listening before passing judgment on a suspect. We no longer carry weapons around in the community except on special occasions. This change in perception has improved how we relate to community members in a more cordial wamore cordially due to the good mutual relationship."

Habu Adamu Jigawa, an administrative officer "Zone B" which includes Fika, Fune, Potiskum, and Nangere Local Government Area of the Yobe state reflected on how people at large were fearful of vigilantes. Suspects were terrified to cross the paths of vigilantes as they would be beaten up mercilessly, and they were forced to make confessions. Mostly the vigilantes use abusive or unpleasant language. The training in nonviolent communication has changed Jigawa's entire perception. He says, "The

training in nonviolent communication which I call '*kwancacciyar lafazi*', translated as 'tranquil communication,' turned everything around for vigilantes like us. It enabled us to change the tide of everything; we have now started to communicate with suspects in a positive way so that they feel comfortable to share or plead guilty in whatever the case may be. As a result of the change in our approach, the relationship bonds between traditional leaders and us have increased, and now they have greater confidence in us."

Deborah Yusuf, a female vigilante commander from Damaturu Local Government Area, Yobe State, observed that initiation to the world of nonviolent communication has helped her to change her perspective on how conflicts could be resolved. It has given her new insights on how to respond to people involved in conflicts. She confessed that exposure to the elements and dimensions of nonviolent communication has made her understand that being feared does not help one achieve one's goals. Instead, it is a hindrance as people cannot open up to the vigilantes. With pleasant communication, one can ensure greater engagement, she noted.

Another vigilante commander, Zanna Kadiri from Damaturu Local Government Area, Yobe State reflected on how an understanding of the pillars of nonviolent communication- the five pillars of Gandhian non-violence- helped him to identify his strength and weaknesses while carrying out his duties as a community vigilante. He said, "I now know the best way to use healthy communication and how to use the right words during an investigation. This yields more results compared to while applying force. This indeed has helped our work much easier."

Haruna Abubakar, a vigilante group commander of Fune Local Government Area, Yobe State, reflected on how nonviolent communication can catalyze mutual understanding between vigilantes and communities at large. He pointed out how the knowledge gained through the training programme now supports peace initiatives focused on resolving lingering communal issues.

Haruna said, "The knowledge gained has also minimized the chances of taking communal conflict cases to police stations. Instead, a dialogue platform has been established in the community comprising of community members, vigilante officers, community heads and other relevant stakeholders. This approach is adopted because the dialogue is one of the oldest and most effective traditional conflict resolution methods involving exchanging opinions on a particular issue."

Mohammed Zakariya, a vigilante member of Gaidam Local Government Area, Yobe State talked about how the introduction to elements of nonviolent communication has facilitated the reconstitution of the investigation board comprising of persons that participated in the training program. The board members are using the principles of the pillars of nonviolent communication and its elements in bringing the culprits and communal issues to a logical conclusion.

Zakariya talks about how initiation to nonviolent communication transforms the relationship of vigilantes with the community. He said, "The vigilantes generally have no friends in the community and are always avoided by community members. But now due to the assimilation of principles of nonviolent communication, community members now see us as their friends and are supporting us greatly in carrying out our activities. Due to this new development, we now have an office in the community where an investigation is being carried out on issues that serve as a threat to peace."

Similarly, other vigilantes who took the training talked about enhancement of their skills in listening, showing greater openness and flexibility in their communication, being nonjudgmental and overcoming many stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

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. In the backdrop of the positive results of the training program, Hope Interactive is developing

a framework of sustained intervention through nonviolent communication.

The transformational effects of training in nonviolent communication also underline the importance of introducing it at a national level.

To conclude, it would be apt to quote Isa Bulama, Kasatchiya community, Gujba Local Government Area, who argued, “*Wannan koyarwan na da muhimanci sosai, muna bukarar ana yinta jifa-jifa* (this training is of importance to us, we would like it to be done at regular intervals)”.

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