
FROM AHIMSA TO ACTIVE PEACEBUILDING: REFRAMING GANDHIAN NONVIOLENCE FOR CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary conflicts increasingly demonstrate the limitations of peacebuilding approaches that focus primarily on military intervention, ceasefire agreements and political settlements. Although such approaches may reduce immediate violence, they often leave unresolved the inequalities, exclusion, mistrust, historical grievances and social divisions that allow conflict to re-emerge. This article examines the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence to contemporary peacebuilding, with particular attention to African contexts. It focuses on three interconnected concepts: ahimsa, satyagraha and sarvodaya. The article argues that ahimsa provides the ethical foundation for peacebuilding, satyagraha provides a practical means of confronting injustice without reproducing violence, while sarvodaya provides the social objective of inclusive development and shared wellbeing.

The study adopts a qualitative approach based on a structured literature review and conceptual analysis. Foundational writings on Gandhian philosophy were examined alongside scholarship on positive peace, conflict transformation, civil resistance, reconciliation, development, climate-related insecurity and African peacebuilding. The analysis demonstrates that Gandhian nonviolence is more than the rejection of physical violence. It represents an integrated approach that connects personal ethics, civic action, social justice and institutional transformation.

The discussion applies this framework to Rwanda and Nigeria. Rwanda illustrates the complexity of reconciliation, justice and social healing following mass violence, while Nigeria demonstrates the relationship between governance, inequality, identity, resource competition and conflict. The article proposes a six-stage Gandhian peacebuilding framework

based on restoring human dignity, seeking truth and identifying injustice, promoting disciplined nonviolent action, transforming relationships and structures, building inclusive wellbeing, and ultimately advancing positive peace. The study concludes that Gandhian nonviolence should not be treated as a substitute for legitimate security institutions, justice systems or development policy. Rather, it provides a complementary ethical and practical framework for transforming the relationships and structures that sustain conflict. Its continuing relevance lies in the connection it establishes between the methods used to pursue peace and the kind of peace that those methods ultimately produce.

KEYWORDS: Gandhian nonviolence; ahimsa; satyagraha; sarvodaya; positive peace; conflict transformation; African peacebuilding; reconciliation; social justice; civil resistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Peace remains one of humanity's greatest aspirations, yet violent conflict continues to affect societies across the world. Contemporary conflicts are rarely caused by a single factor. Political exclusion, economic inequality, identity-based discrimination, weak institutions, competition over land and natural resources, historical grievances, misinformation and declining public trust can interact in ways that make conflict more likely.

The persistence of such conflicts raises an important question: Is the absence of violence sufficient to constitute peace?

For many societies, the answer is no. A ceasefire may stop fighting without addressing the grievances that produced it. A political settlement may distribute political power without rebuilding relationships between divided communities. Military intervention may weaken an armed group while leaving unemployment, exclusion, trauma and resentment largely untouched. Sustainable peace therefore requires more than stopping violence. It requires addressing the conditions that allow violence to emerge and recur.

This broader understanding of peace has been central to peace research since the work of Johan Galtung. In his influential distinction between negative and positive peace, Galtung (1969) argued that peace should not be understood merely as the absence of direct violence. Positive peace requires attention to justice, equality and the social structures that shape people's opportunities and relationships. Galtung's later work further developed the relationship between direct, structural and cultural violence (Galtung, 1990, 1996).

John Paul Lederach (1997, 2005) extended this understanding through conflict transformation. Rather than treating conflict simply as a problem to be managed or resolved,

conflict transformation considers how relationships, structures and institutions can be changed so that conflict does not continue to reproduce violence. This perspective has influenced contemporary peacebuilding by placing greater emphasis on reconciliation, local ownership, social relationships and long-term institutional change.

The international peacebuilding agenda has similarly moved toward prevention and sustaining peace. The United Nations (2020) emphasises the importance of addressing the political, social and economic conditions that create vulnerability to conflict. Peacebuilding is therefore increasingly understood as a long-term process connecting security, governance, development, human rights and social cohesion.

These developments provide an important context for revisiting the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi is widely remembered for his leadership in India's independence movement and for his use of nonviolent resistance. However, his contribution extends considerably beyond political protest. His writings present a broad philosophy linking ethics, politics, social relations, economic life and human dignity (Gandhi, 1927, 1938, 1945, 1950).

Three interconnected concepts are particularly important: ahimsa, satyagraha and sarvodaya. Ahimsa is commonly translated as nonviolence, but Gandhi understood it as a deeper moral commitment to respect life and reject hatred, revenge and dehumanisation. Satyagraha, usually associated with truth-force or holding firmly to truth, represents active resistance to injustice through disciplined nonviolent action. Sarvodaya refers broadly to the welfare or upliftment of all and connects political freedom with social justice, dignity and inclusive development.

These concepts remain relevant to contemporary peacebuilding because they connect the moral foundations of peace with practical political action and social development.

Recent scholarship confirms that Gandhi continues to generate significant debate. Gianolla (2025), for example, examines satyagraha as a political culture grounded in relationships, love and nonviolence. Lal (2025) brings together contemporary scholarship examining Gandhi's understanding of truth, nonviolence, politics and moral engagement in an age increasingly described as "post-truth." Monika and Sharma (2025) similarly demonstrate the continuing relevance of Gandhian nonviolence and religious pluralism in addressing contemporary communal divisions.

The relevance of Gandhian thought is particularly significant in Africa. Many conflicts on the continent involve overlapping political, economic, social and environmental factors.

Governance failures, unequal access to resources, youth unemployment, ethnic and religious tensions, environmental degradation and historical grievances frequently interact.

Rwanda and Nigeria provide two different contexts for examining the possible application of Gandhian principles. Rwanda's experience following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi demonstrates the difficulty of rebuilding trust, justice and social relationships after mass violence. Nigeria faces multiple forms of conflict, including communal violence, farmer-herder tensions, violent extremism, electoral violence, separatist agitation and resource-related disputes.

The purpose of this article is not to argue that Gandhi provides a ready-made solution to these conflicts. Rather, it examines what Gandhian nonviolence can contribute to contemporary peacebuilding when it is placed in conversation with positive peace and conflict transformation.

The central argument is that Gandhian nonviolence provides an integrated peacebuilding framework in which ahimsa offers the ethical foundation, satyagraha provides the mechanism for confronting injustice, and sarvodaya defines the social objective of inclusive wellbeing.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Gandhian Nonviolence

Gandhian nonviolence is sometimes understood simply as the refusal to use physical force. Such an interpretation is incomplete.

For Gandhi, nonviolence was an active moral position. It required individuals and communities to confront injustice while refusing to reproduce hatred and dehumanisation. Nonviolence therefore involved courage rather than weakness.

Gandhi's writings repeatedly connect truth, nonviolence and social responsibility (Gandhi, 1927, 1938, 1950). His understanding of truth was not merely a claim that one party possessed an absolute truth. It involved an ongoing search that required humility and willingness to listen.

This has direct implications for contemporary peacebuilding. In divided societies, competing communities often possess different narratives about the origins of conflict. If one narrative is imposed as the only legitimate version, the process may deepen rather than reduce resentment.

Gandhian nonviolence therefore encourages a different approach: confront injustice without denying the humanity of those who hold opposing positions.

Recent scholarship also cautions against treating Gandhi as an uncomplicated moral icon. Lal (2025) notes continuing scholarly debates surrounding Gandhi's politics, personality and historical legacy. This critical approach is important because the contemporary relevance of Gandhi should arise from careful analysis rather than idealisation.

2.2 Ahimsa

Ahimsa is the ethical foundation of the Gandhian approach.

It involves refusing to harm others, but its meaning is broader than physical restraint. It encompasses attitudes, language, relationships and political behaviour.

In contemporary peacebuilding, this principle can be applied to the prevention of hate speech, political dehumanisation and identity-based hostility. When communities are repeatedly described as dangerous, inferior or illegitimate, violence can become easier to justify.

Ahimsa therefore has both personal and institutional implications. It calls upon individuals to reject hatred while also challenging institutions and political systems that discriminate against particular groups.

This relationship between moral attitudes and structural conditions corresponds closely with Galtung's (1990) concept of cultural violence. Cultural beliefs and narratives can legitimise structural or direct violence. A peacebuilding approach that changes institutions without addressing harmful narratives may therefore leave an important source of conflict untouched.

2.3 Satyagraha

Satyagraha provides the action component of Gandhian nonviolence.

Gandhi's approach was not passive. It included civil disobedience, non-cooperation, boycotts, public mobilisation and other forms of disciplined resistance (Gandhi, 1950).

Sharp (1973) later developed a systematic study of nonviolent action, identifying numerous methods through which people can exercise political power without resorting to violence. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) subsequently provided empirical evidence that nonviolent resistance can be strategically effective under certain conditions.

Their study of resistance campaigns demonstrated that nonviolent movements have important advantages, particularly their ability to attract broader participation and create pressure through multiple forms of political and social action.

However, nonviolent action should not be romanticised. Its effectiveness depends on organisation, leadership, participation, strategy and the political environment (Nepstad, 2011; Schock, 2005). Nonviolence is therefore both a moral commitment and a strategic practice.

2.4 Sarvodaya

Sarvodaya provides the social and developmental dimension of Gandhi's philosophy.

For Gandhi, political independence was incomplete if ordinary people remained poor, excluded or powerless. The welfare of the wider community therefore formed an important part of his vision of social transformation (Gandhi, 1945; Gandhi, 2001).

This idea connects strongly with positive peace. If poverty, exclusion, inequality and lack of opportunity remain, a society may experience negative peace while continuing to contain serious structural tensions.

Contemporary peacebuilding scholarship increasingly recognises this relationship. Paris (2004) argues that peacebuilding must consider the political and economic institutions necessary to create stable societies. Barnett et al. (2007) similarly emphasise that peacebuilding includes a broad range of activities extending beyond the immediate termination of armed conflict. Call and Cousens (2008) further demonstrate the complexity of ending wars and building sustainable peace.

Sarvodaya adds a moral question to this discussion: Does peace improve the lives of the people who experience conflict, particularly those who are most vulnerable?

3. Positive Peace and Conflict Transformation

Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace provides one of the most useful theoretical connections to Gandhian thought.

Negative peace concerns the absence of direct violence. Positive peace concerns the presence of conditions that enable people and communities to live with justice, dignity and meaningful participation.

Galtung (1990, 1996) further distinguishes direct, structural and cultural violence. Direct violence is visible in physical harm. Structural violence is embedded in social and political arrangements that systematically disadvantage particular groups. Cultural violence consists of beliefs and narratives that legitimise such arrangements.

Gandhian philosophy can be read as addressing all three dimensions.

Ahimsa challenges cultural violence by rejecting hatred and dehumanisation.

Satyagraha challenges structural violence by providing a means through which communities can resist injustice.

Sarvodaya addresses the consequences of structural inequality by promoting inclusive social and economic wellbeing.

Lederach's (1997) conflict transformation theory adds another dimension. Sustainable peace requires transformation of relationships as well as institutions. Conflict is therefore not

simply an event to be stopped; it can be an indication that deeper relationships and structures require attention.

Miall (2011) similarly presents conflict transformation as a process that goes beyond the management of immediate disputes to address deeper structures and relationships.

Mac Ginty (2021) draws attention to the everyday practices through which ordinary people maintain peaceful relationships even in environments affected by conflict. This emphasis on everyday peace is compatible with Gandhi's belief that peace is constructed through daily conduct rather than achieved only through formal political agreements.

Richmond (2022) further challenges approaches that treat peace as something delivered through international intervention without sufficient attention to local political and social realities. Paffenholz (2021) likewise calls attention to the need to understand peacebuilding as a continuing process rather than a finite intervention.

Together, these perspectives provide a strong theoretical basis for examining Gandhian nonviolence as a contemporary peacebuilding framework.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative design based on a structured literature review and conceptual analysis.

The design was selected because the study seeks to examine ideas, theories and conceptual relationships rather than statistically test hypotheses. The purpose was to connect classical Gandhian philosophy with contemporary peacebuilding scholarship and examine its relevance to African conflict contexts.

4.2 Literature Search

Relevant literature was reviewed during 2026 using academic and institutional sources. Searches focused on scholarship addressing Gandhian philosophy, nonviolence, civil resistance, peacebuilding, conflict transformation, reconciliation, positive peace, social justice, climate-related insecurity and African conflicts.

Search terms included:

Gandhian nonviolence

Mahatma Gandhi

ahimsa

satyagraha

sarvodaya

positive peace
structural violence
conflict transformation
civil resistance
peacebuilding
reconciliation
restorative justice
African peacebuilding
Rwanda reconciliation
Nigeria conflict
farmer-herder conflict
climate security
digital peacebuilding

Reference lists of relevant works were also examined to identify foundational sources and additional scholarly literature.

4.3 Selection of Literature

Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, edited volumes and publications from recognised international organisations.

The literature included both foundational works and recent scholarship. Foundational literature was necessary for understanding Gandhi, Galtung, Lederach and theories of nonviolent action, while recent publications were used to assess contemporary debates.

Sources were excluded when they lacked a clear connection to the study's objectives or provided only biographical descriptions without relevance to nonviolence, peacebuilding or conflict transformation.

4.4 Thematic Analysis

The literature was analysed according to six themes:

Ahimsa as the ethical foundation of peace;

Satyagraha as active nonviolent civic engagement;

Sarvodaya as social justice and inclusive development;

the relationship between Gandhian philosophy, positive peace and conflict transformation;

the relevance and limitations of Gandhian principles in Rwanda and Nigeria; and

the emerging relevance of Gandhian principles to climate and digital peacebuilding.

The analysis was interpretive and comparative rather than statistical.

4.5 Limitations

The study relies on published literature and does not present original interview, survey or field-observation data. The Rwanda and Nigeria discussions are therefore conceptual applications rather than empirical case studies.

The findings should consequently be understood as a theoretical contribution that can inform future empirical research.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Ahimsa as the Ethical Foundation of Peacebuilding

The analysis indicates that ahimsa provides the most fundamental contribution of Gandhian philosophy to peacebuilding: the recognition of the humanity of the other.

Many conflicts become particularly destructive when opposing groups cease to see each other as fellow human beings. Dehumanising language can turn neighbours into enemies and political opponents into existential threats.

This was evident in Rwanda before the 1994 genocide, where political propaganda and identity-based narratives contributed to an environment in which mass violence became possible (Mamdani, 2001; Prunier, 1995; Straus, 2006). Hintjens (2008) similarly demonstrates the complexity of identity politics in post-genocide Rwanda.

The lesson is not limited to Rwanda. Contemporary political conflicts can also become dangerous when leaders mobilise communities through fear and hatred.

Ahimsa offers an alternative. It does not demand silence in the face of injustice. It demands that injustice be challenged without denying the humanity of the person or group responsible. This distinction is important for reconciliation. A community cannot build sustainable peace if reconciliation simply means suppressing anger while leaving injustice unaddressed. Equally, justice that permanently defines the other party as an enemy can make future coexistence difficult.

The practical implication is that peace education should include emotional literacy, empathy, dialogue and responsible communication alongside conflict analysis.

5.2 Satyagraha as Active Nonviolent Action

The second finding concerns the strategic dimension of nonviolence.

Gandhi's satyagraha demonstrates that nonviolence can be an active form of political engagement. It enables communities to challenge injustice while preserving the possibility of future coexistence.

Sharp (1973) demonstrated that nonviolent action can involve a wide range of methods. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) provided empirical evidence that nonviolent campaigns can achieve significant political objectives under favourable conditions.

Schock (2005) argues that nonviolent movements can contribute to democratic transformation, while Nepstad (2011) demonstrates that the outcomes of nonviolent resistance depend partly on political and institutional conditions.

These findings are important for contemporary peacebuilding because communities should not be treated merely as passive recipients of external peace interventions.

They can become peace actors.

In Africa, this can include community dialogue, peaceful civic campaigns, interfaith engagement, youth-led initiatives, women's peace networks and public accountability movements.

However, satyagraha requires discipline. Uncontrolled protest can become violent. Nonviolent action therefore requires leadership, organisation and clear principles.

5.3 Sarvodaya and Inclusive Peace

The third finding is that peace cannot be separated from people's material conditions.

A society may experience a decline in violence while poverty, unemployment and inequality continue to affect large sections of the population.

This is particularly important in contexts where young people have limited opportunities and communities compete over land, water or employment.

Gandhi's sarvodaya provides a useful way of addressing this problem. The question is not only whether conflict has stopped, but whether the benefits of peace are shared.

This argument corresponds with contemporary peacebuilding research linking peace to development, inclusion and legitimate institutions (Barnett et al., 2007; Call & Cousens, 2008; de Coning, 2018; Paris, 2004).

It also reinforces the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals and the relationship between peace, justice and inclusive institutions.

A sarvodaya-oriented peacebuilding approach would therefore pay attention to education, livelihoods, health, social protection, access to resources and participation.

6. The Integrated Gandhian Peacebuilding Framework

The three Gandhian principles should not be separated.

Ahimsa without satyagraha risks becoming passive morality.

Satyagraha without ahimsa can become confrontation without reconciliation.

Satyagraha without sarvodaya can achieve political change without improving the lives of ordinary people.

The strength of the framework lies in their combination.

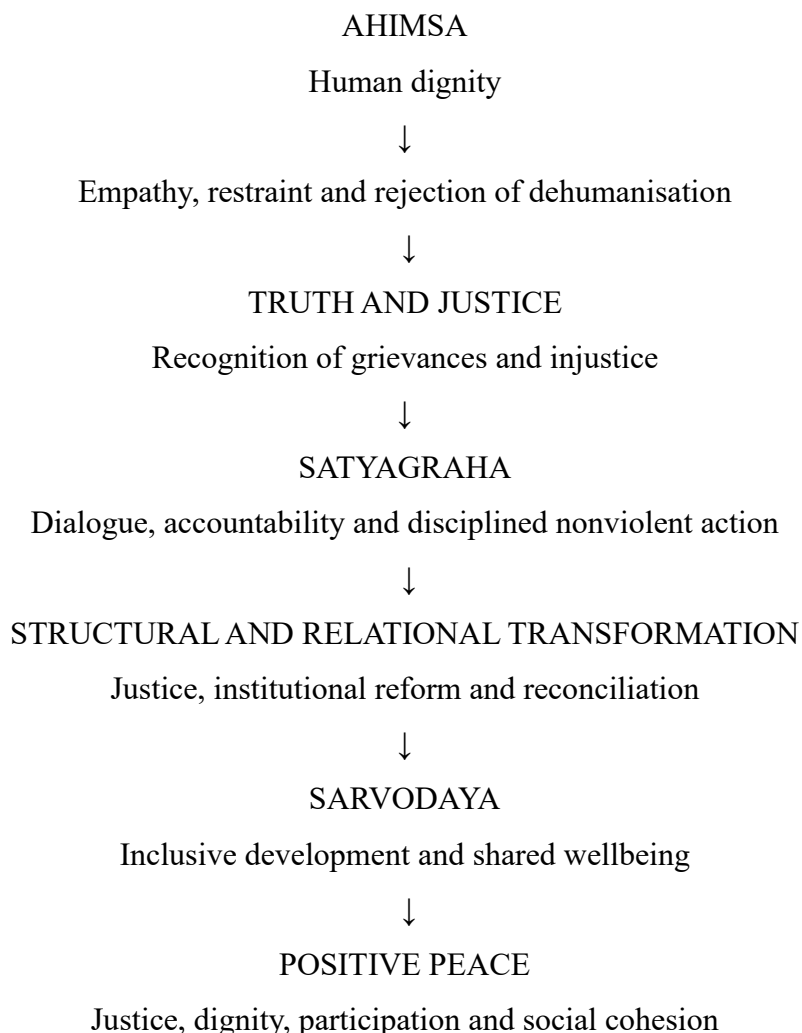


Figure 1. Proposed Gandhian Peacebuilding Framework.

The framework suggests that peacebuilding should move through six connected stages:

Recognise human dignity.

Seek truth and identify injustice.

Mobilise through peaceful civic action.

Transform relationships and structures.

Create inclusive wellbeing.

Consolidate positive peace.

This framework represents the central conceptual contribution of the article.

7. Rwanda: Reconciliation, Justice and Social Healing

Rwanda presents one of the most important examples of post-conflict reconstruction in Africa.

The 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi was preceded by years of political manipulation, identity-based discrimination, propaganda and dehumanisation (Mamdani, 2001; Prunier, 1995; Straus, 2006).

After the genocide, Rwanda faced the enormous task of rebuilding institutions and social relationships.

The Gacaca courts became an important part of the country's transitional justice process. Gacaca drew upon community-level mechanisms and was intended to address the enormous number of genocide-related cases while promoting truth, accountability and reconciliation.

However, scholarly assessments have been mixed.

Sarkin (2001) highlighted tensions between justice, reconciliation, human rights, due process and the role of Gacaca. Thomson (2011) argued that local power relationships affected the way Gacaca operated. Rettig (2013) similarly found that Gacaca produced complex effects on truth, justice and reconciliation. Clark (2010) provides a detailed analysis of how Gacaca contributed to rebuilding social bonds.

Brounéus (2008) further demonstrates the importance and complexity of truth-telling in Rwanda's reconciliation process.

These debates are important for a Gandhian analysis.

It would be incorrect to claim that Gacaca was a Gandhian institution. Its development arose from Rwanda's particular historical and political circumstances.

Nevertheless, there are useful points of comparison.

The concern with truth can be considered alongside satyagraha. The effort to restore social relationships can be compared with the relational dimension of ahimsa. The broader objective of social reconstruction corresponds in some respects with sarvodaya.

At the same time, Rwanda demonstrates why nonviolence cannot be reduced to forgiveness without justice.

Survivors of mass violence may require recognition, truth, accountability and healing before meaningful reconciliation can take place. Tutu (1999) similarly emphasises the difficult relationship between forgiveness, truth and reconciliation.

This suggests that Gandhian peacebuilding should be interpreted as reconciliation with justice, rather than reconciliation without accountability.

8. Nigeria: Conflict, Inclusion and Community Peacebuilding

Nigeria presents a different set of peacebuilding challenges.

The country has experienced communal conflicts, farmer-herder tensions, violent extremism, electoral violence, separatist agitation and resource-related disputes. These conflicts arise from different combinations of political, economic, environmental and social factors.

Farmer-herder conflict provides a particularly useful example.

Research shows that these conflicts have consequences extending beyond immediate violence. Nnaji et al. (2022) found significant relationships between farmer-herder conflict and food insecurity among rural Nigerian households. The severity of conflict was particularly important.

Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) demonstrate that resource management and peacebuilding processes can themselves become part of conflict dynamics when state and local actors distribute resources unequally or empower some groups over others. Chukwuma (2020) similarly illustrates how the framing of herder-farmer conflict as an issue of insecurity can influence the ways in which the conflict is understood and addressed.

These findings are particularly relevant to sarvodaya.

A security response alone cannot resolve disputes in which communities depend upon the same land and water resources for survival.

A Gandhian approach would combine three dimensions.

First, ahimsa would challenge narratives that portray farmers or herders as inherently violent or illegitimate.

Second, satyagraha would support peaceful advocacy and civic participation by affected communities.

Third, sarvodaya would require equitable resource management and development strategies that address the needs of both communities.

This does not mean that all conflicts can be resolved through dialogue alone. Institutions must be capable of enforcing agreements, protecting communities and ensuring accountability.

The Nigerian experience therefore reinforces the argument that Gandhian nonviolence should complement, rather than replace, legitimate institutions.

9. Climate Change and Resource Conflict

Climate change increasingly interacts with existing social and political vulnerabilities.

Changes in rainfall, drought, land degradation and water availability can increase competition over resources. Research on environmental security has long examined the relationship between resource scarcity and conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Raleigh & Urdal, 2007).

More recent climate-conflict scholarship cautions against simplistic claims that climate change directly causes violence. Instead, climate pressures often operate through existing political, economic and social vulnerabilities (Adger et al., 2014; Ide et al., 2020).

This distinction is important for Africa.

Where climate pressures affect pastoralist and farming communities, peacebuilding must consider both environmental and social dimensions. The United Nations Environment Programme (2021) similarly emphasises the importance of understanding climate and environmental pressures as part of wider security risks.

The Gandhian framework offers a useful response.

Ahimsa discourages dehumanising narratives.

Satyagraha supports peaceful community mobilisation around fair resource governance.

Sarvodaya encourages development approaches that consider the welfare of all affected communities.

Climate adaptation should therefore increasingly be connected with conflict prevention.

10. Gandhian Nonviolence in the Digital Age

The contemporary peacebuilding environment differs significantly from Gandhi's historical context because political mobilisation increasingly takes place through digital platforms.

Social media can provide opportunities for peace education, early warning, civic participation and the sharing of positive narratives. At the same time, digital platforms can accelerate misinformation, hate speech and polarisation.

The relationship between media and conflict has been extensively examined in peace and conflict research (Howard et al., 2011; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; Zeitzoff, 2017).

A Gandhian approach to digital peacebuilding would place particular emphasis on three principles.

First, ahimsa should inform digital behaviour. Users should avoid dehumanising language, threats and deliberate provocation.

Second, satyagraha should reinforce the importance of truth. In an environment where false information can spread rapidly, the search for truth becomes an important peacebuilding practice.

Third, sarvodaya should encourage digital inclusion. Peacebuilding through technology should not benefit only those who already have access to digital resources.

Digital peacebuilding therefore provides an important contemporary extension of Gandhian thought. The question is no longer only how individuals behave toward one another physically, but also how they communicate, mobilise and construct narratives in digital spaces.

This provides an important opportunity for future research into the relationship between Gandhian philosophy and digital peacebuilding in Africa.

11. Community Ownership and Everyday Peace

One of the strongest connections between Gandhian thought and contemporary peacebuilding is the importance of local agency.

Gandhi believed that communities should not depend entirely on external authorities to determine their future. This principle can be compared with contemporary arguments for local ownership in peacebuilding (Autesserre, 2014; Mac Ginty, 2021; Richmond, 2022).

Peace is often sustained through ordinary actions: neighbours helping one another, communities resolving disputes, religious leaders encouraging restraint, youth groups organising constructive activities and families teaching children tolerance.

These everyday practices may receive less international attention than formal peace agreements, but they are essential to social stability.

Mac Ginty (2021) describes these practices as forms of everyday peace.

The Gandhian perspective strengthens this argument by connecting everyday behaviour with broader ethical principles.

Peace is therefore not only an institutional responsibility. It is also a social practice.

12. Policy Implications

Several implications arise from the analysis.

12.1 Peace education

Peace education should develop more than knowledge about conflict. It should build empathy, dialogue skills, critical thinking, nonviolent communication and responsible citizenship.

12.2 Local participation

Communities affected by conflict should participate in identifying problems, developing solutions and evaluating peacebuilding programmes.

12.3 Inclusive governance

Governments should create meaningful mechanisms for participation and accountability. Exclusion should be recognised as a potential conflict driver.

12.4 Youth engagement

Young people should be recognised as peace actors rather than simply as potential victims or perpetrators of violence. Peacebuilding programmes should create meaningful opportunities for youth leadership, entrepreneurship, education and civic engagement.

12.5 Women's participation

Women should have meaningful roles in conflict prevention, mediation, reconciliation and community development. Their participation should be substantive rather than symbolic.

12.6 Digital peacebuilding

Peace organisations should use digital platforms for peace education, early warning and dialogue while developing strategies for countering misinformation and hate speech.

12.7 Climate-sensitive peacebuilding

Environmental and development programmes should assess potential conflict risks associated with climate pressures and resource competition.

12.8 Ethical leadership

Political, religious and community leaders should recognise the influence of their language on social relationships. Leaders who mobilise through fear and hatred can undermine peacebuilding efforts.

12.9 Institutional reform

Nonviolence should be combined with effective justice institutions, accountable governance and protection of human rights.

13. Limitations of Gandhian Nonviolence

Gandhian nonviolence has important limitations.

First, nonviolence may be extremely difficult in situations involving immediate mass violence or actors who have no interest in dialogue.

Second, nonviolent movements require organisation and discipline. Without these, peaceful mobilisation can lose direction or become vulnerable to manipulation.

Third, moral transformation cannot replace institutional reform. Societies require functioning justice systems, accountable governments and economic opportunities.

Fourth, Gandhi's ideas emerged from a particular historical and cultural context. They should therefore be adapted rather than mechanically transferred to African societies.

Finally, Gandhi's historical legacy remains contested. Contemporary scholarship has raised questions about aspects of his political thought, racial attitudes and social views (Lal, 2025). A serious academic treatment must acknowledge these complexities.

The relevance of Gandhi therefore does not depend on treating him as flawless. It depends on examining whether particular elements of his philosophy remain useful for addressing contemporary problems.

14. Discussion: From Nonviolence to Active Peacebuilding

The central finding of this study is that Gandhian nonviolence should be understood as active peacebuilding rather than passive pacifism.

The distinction is important.

Passive nonviolence asks people not to use violence.

Active peacebuilding asks what people should do instead.

The Gandhian answer is to:

recognise the dignity of others;

confront injustice;

search for truth;

organise peacefully;

rebuild relationships;

transform harmful structures; and

promote the welfare of all.

This provides a useful bridge between ethics and policy.

Contemporary peacebuilding often separates security, development, governance and reconciliation into different programmes. Gandhian philosophy encourages a more integrated approach.

Security without justice may produce temporary stability.

Development without inclusion may reproduce inequality.

Justice without reconciliation may leave relationships damaged.

Dialogue without institutional reform may fail to address the causes of conflict.

The three Gandhian principles provide a way of bringing these dimensions together.

15. Proposed Gandhian Framework for African Peacebuilding

Based on the analysis, the following framework is proposed.

Stage 1: Human dignity

Begin with ahimsa. Identify dehumanising narratives and practices and create conditions for recognition and empathy.

Stage 2: Truth and injustice

Use satyagraha to identify and confront injustice. Peacebuilding should not avoid difficult truths.

Stage 3: Nonviolent civic action

Support peaceful community mobilisation, dialogue, advocacy and accountability.

Stage 4: Transformation

Transform relationships, institutions and structures that reproduce exclusion and violence.

Stage 5: Sarvodaya

Ensure that peace produces tangible improvements in inclusion, livelihoods, opportunity and social wellbeing.

Stage 6: Positive peace

Measure peace not only by the absence of violence but also by the presence of justice, participation, dignity and social cohesion.

The framework can therefore be summarised as:

Ahimsa → Truth → Satyagraha → Transformation → Sarvodaya → Positive Peace

The framework is deliberately simple. Its purpose is not to replace existing peacebuilding models but to provide an ethical and practical lens through which they can be strengthened.

16. CONCLUSION

This article examined the moral, political and social foundations of Gandhian nonviolence and considered their relevance to contemporary peacebuilding in Africa.

The analysis demonstrates that Gandhi's philosophy remains significant because it connects the methods used to pursue peace with the social conditions required to sustain it.

Ahimsa provides the ethical foundation. It calls for recognition of human dignity and rejection of hatred and dehumanisation.

Satyagraha provides the mechanism for action. It demonstrates that confronting injustice does not necessarily require violence.

Sarvodaya provides the social objective. It reminds peacebuilders that peace must include the welfare of those who are poor, excluded and vulnerable.

The relationship between these principles and positive peace is particularly important. Galtung's work demonstrates that peace requires more than the absence of direct violence, while Lederach's conflict transformation approach emphasises the transformation of relationships and structures.

The experiences of Rwanda and Nigeria demonstrate the practical complexity of this approach. Rwanda shows that reconciliation after mass violence requires truth, justice, healing and social reconstruction. Nigeria demonstrates that conflicts involving land, resources, identity and governance require more than security responses.

The analysis also highlights the relevance of Gandhian thought to climate-related conflict, community peacebuilding and digital communication.

However, Gandhian nonviolence should not be presented as a universal solution. There are situations in which legitimate protection, law enforcement and institutional intervention are necessary. Nonviolent action also requires organisation, strategy and favourable political conditions.

The value of Gandhian nonviolence lies instead in its ability to connect ethics, civic action and social transformation.

The central argument of this article is therefore that peace should not only be understood as an outcome but also as a method. The means through which societies pursue peace influence the character of the peace they eventually create.

For Africa, where many conflicts are connected to inequality, exclusion, resource competition, identity politics and weak institutions, this insight is particularly relevant.

The enduring contribution of Gandhi is not that he provided a simple formula for solving conflict. His contribution is that he challenged the assumption that justice can be achieved through methods that reproduce violence.

In contemporary peacebuilding, that challenge remains important.

17. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Gandhian principles should be incorporated into peace education and conflict transformation programmes.

Peacebuilding programmes should strengthen local community ownership rather than rely primarily on externally designed interventions.

Governments should address structural inequalities, exclusion and governance failures that create conditions for conflict.

Youth and women should be given meaningful roles in peacebuilding and community development.

Peacebuilding organisations should use digital platforms for peace education, early warning and responsible civic engagement.

Climate adaptation and resource-management programmes should incorporate conflict-sensitive and peacebuilding approaches.

Peace initiatives should combine reconciliation with truth, justice and accountability.

Political, religious and community leaders should promote language that encourages coexistence rather than hatred and dehumanisation.

Gandhian nonviolence should complement, rather than replace, legitimate security institutions, justice systems and human rights protections.

Future empirical studies should test the proposed Gandhian peacebuilding framework through field research in conflict-affected African communities.

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Finally, I appreciate peacebuilders, researchers, educators, community leaders and civil society organisations working in different parts of the world to promote societies founded on justice, inclusion, human dignity and peaceful coexistence.

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