

Maintaining nonviolence during an action

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Wanting an action to be nonviolent does not in itself ensure that this will be the case. Any action involves a complex set of actors, not all of whom might agree with nonviolence, and not all of which might even be on our side. This is especially true for larger actions with public mobilisation, involving a variety of groups from a broad political spectrum.

To ensure an action remains nonviolent, it makes sense to assess potential risks:

- Who do we want to come to the action? Who are we inviting? Who else might also come with a different idea as to what it is about?
- What do we think about the commitment to nonviolence of the varying groups that might join the actions? What level of preparation/training will people have?
- What kind of disturbances might arise because of the actions of our opponents, or the police? Do we see a risk of agent provocateurs being used to provoke violence?

If your assessment comes to the conclusion that there is a risk of problems, it is important to put structures and strategies in place to deal with these should they arise. This can include teams prepared to intervene in case of a violent escalation, be it by police or other individuals.

Nonviolence Guidelines

Nonviolence guidelines are often used as one way to minimise the risk of violence, as they are a clear statement of the organisers of an action about the nature of the action. 'Nonviolence guidelines' are not the same as nonviolent principles (see p11). They are an agreement as to how participants in an action will behave. They may be stated in very practical terms ('We will not carry any weapons') or may be in more philosophical terms ('We will gather together in a manner that reflects the world we choose to create').

Nonviolence guidelines have their advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes they can create more problems than they solve, while at other times they contribute to mutual confidence and a feeling of safety among participants. Nonviolence guidelines can send an important message to (potential) participants that the action will be nonviolent, and that violence will not be tolerated. Agreement on what we mean by 'nonviolence', or why we choose nonviolent

Nonviolence

What is nonviolence, and why use it?

Strategy

Stages of escalation

Nonviolent actions

Working in groups
Forms of nonviolent action
Fear

Case studies

Chile: Gandhi's insights gave people courage to defy Chile's dictatorship
Castor – how we mobilised people for civil disobedience

Training

Hassle lines
Consequences of fear
Role playing
Tools for grounding, protecting and blockading
Spectrum and cross spectrum

“I was with thousands of protesters walking through fields heading towards the fenced off area of Heiligendamn where the G8 were meeting in 2007. The atmosphere was one of unity and purpose, our aim being to create a human road block with our bodies; we wanted to use our bodies as a sign of peaceful resistance to the meeting of the G8 and to disrupt the meeting itself by preventing delegates accessing the area. We were so many and as we approached a small and rather terrified looking police line, a few protesters ran towards them aggressively. In unison hundreds of protesters stopped and calmly shouted ‘NO!’ The protesters who were running at the police stopped. It was a powerful moment as we collectively voiced our opposition. We wanted the protest to be peaceful, to be a safe space where we would not use aggression or violence. We continued on our journey leaving the small line of police behind us, our sheer numbers meant that we could easily pass them. We created a peaceful blockade with our bodies which lasted for three days.”

tactics, should not be assumed. Even in a small and apparently homogeneous group, discussion will bring up different interpretations and varied levels of commitment to nonviolence. Nonviolence guidelines make clear what is expected for a specific action.

Nonviolence guidelines are also sometimes seen as divisive, especially when working in broad coalitions. The word “nonviolence” alone is often seen as ideological and dogmatic, even among groups that in practice (though maybe not ideologically) act nonviolently. In these cases, it is more important to develop trust between the different groups organising an action, and to devise strategies for ensuring the action itself remains nonviolent.

Nonviolence guidelines are not a substitute for training and preparation. Government infiltrators may attempt to discredit a group by urging people to act violently. Nonviolence guidelines – coupled with nonviolence training – can make it possible for a large number of people to participate in an action nonviolently, even if they have little experience in this area. No matter how committed the organisers are to the principles of nonviolent action, or how well the campaign strategy is organised, it is crucial that the participants in demonstrations and civil disobedience actions reflect the principles of nonviolence, if it is to be an effective, nonviolent campaign.

Examples of nonviolence guidelines:

- Faslane 365: http://www.faslane365.org/fr/display_preview/nonviolence_guidelines
- Lakenheath Action Group: <http://www.motherearth.org/lakenheathaction/nv.php3>
- School of the Americas Watch: <http://www.soaw.org/article.php?id=1093>
- Principles of the Students' Union of the University of Prishtina, 1997: <http://wri-irg.org/node/6568>
- NATO-ZU/Shut down NATO: , March 2009: <http://wri-irg.org/node/6980>