

## **International Day of Nonviolence: Necessity, Philosophy & Methodology of Nonviolence**

*Oct. 2, 2021*

### **Grounds for Hope**

Thank you very much, it's great to be with you all for this important conversation on the profound relevance of nonviolent struggle for our world today.

I'd like to take the time I have today to address how this powerful type of action can be improved to better face the acute and multiple crises we face as a global community.

My work at the Albert Einstein Institution, where we develop resources and trainings on nonviolent action gives me an interesting lens on the world, a hopeful one.

Hopeful because I see how people on every continent are using nonviolent action for every issue imaginable, against occupation and dictatorships, to advance the rights of women, to protect ethnic and religious minorities, to fight health, environmental and labor violations by corporations, against destruction of the environment, and in multitudes of other struggles. In case after case when people are facing oppression, violations of their rights, and other difficult circumstances, they are responding not with violence or with passivity, but with defiant, organized, and courageous nonviolent action.

- Like in Afghanistan where a group of six women gathered outside a high school in eastern Kabul to demand the right for girls to return to school.
- Or here in Boston where I live, where just this week, a group of doctors gathered outside the home of the CEO of the pharmaceutical company Moderna to pressure the company to make the technology behind it's Covid vaccine available to international companies. Here they are standing in front of a giant pile of artificial bones that were meant to represent unnecessary COVID deaths. A powerful scene for sure.
- Or in Belarus where people carried candles to the Belarusian state security service, after the government blocked access to an online newspaper that ran a story about the shooting of an activist.

### **Dangerous trend**

These and others of the multitude of examples around the world are truly impressive and inspiring, and courageous, and they're growing. The research backs this up: around the world, we are seeing an increase in nonviolent campaigns, in part because they're being fueled by digital connectivity and access to information, social media and technology. But we're also seeing a dangerous trend, which is that this increase in the use of nonviolent action is also accompanied by a decline in effectiveness. So in other words, even as there's more nonviolent action in the world, movements are less often achieving their objectives against powerful and well-resourced opponents.

This is dangerous. Because if the narrative that people hear is that nonviolent action doesn't work, that it fails to deliver the changes that their communities so desperately need, they may give in to the perception that there's nothing they can do, or they could turn to what most of our societies tell us is the real power, violence.

So how do we address this gap in effectiveness?

We know that success in nonviolent action is almost never determined by chance or by how pure the beliefs are of the people carrying it out. It's effectiveness is usually linked to the extent to which movements can develop real political power - institutions, networks, skills and capabilities, all these factors can make success more likely.

## **Gandhi**

Gandhi understood well the transformative and revolutionary potential of this type of action, but he never said it was easy or that it offers guarantees. He recognized the importance of discipline, skills, and learning from others, and that's in spite of the fact that he was a political intuitive genius. He talked and wrote about nonviolent struggles in other parts of the world, in China, in the American colonies, Irish tax resistance. About the general strike he said "we too must learn from this russian method against tyranny."

His openness and wisdom in learning from historical examples of nonviolent struggles to figure out what the South Africans, and later the Indians should do, tells us something important about the relationship between studying nonviolent action and practicing it - that in most cases using nonviolent action effectively isn't simply a matter of the heart, it requires access to knowledge and capabilities.

But the good news is that these skills and capabilities can be learned, and as in Gandhi's case, we can learn from the stories and knowledge of brave struggles of the past and those taking place around the world today.

My colleague and mentor Gene Sharp, and dozens of other scholars and practitioners have made important contributions to collecting these stories and insights. SLIDE WITH BOOKS

We now need to advance this effort, so we can better understand nonviolent action, how it works, and what makes it succeed and fail. And the process of generating this knowledge and expanding access to it needs to be decentralized and democratized. There is so much wisdom in our communities, among the people conducting these “experiments with truth” and we need to do better at collecting it and sharing it in news ways, in new multimedia formats, in as many languages as possible, and in ways that facilitate learning.

More than 70 years ago, Gene Sharp learned that research questions can yield important insight that can be helpful, and that remains true today.

- When people use nonviolent action, how do they do it?
- If they are successful, why are they successful and if their struggle failed, why did it fail? Because there’s a lot we can learn from these defeats of our global movements.
- How do they articulate their grievances, recruit people to their causes, get access to the resources that could help them,
- how are they building power in their communities and denying power to their opponents, to the oppressive systems they’re fighting against,
- what was the response of their opponents and if they were met with repression, how did they withstand it?

Because we must remember that opponents who are or could be the targets of these campaigns are sometimes the most aware of the power of nonviolent action and are adapting and becoming more sophisticated in undermining movements for change.

By asking these questions, there’s a lot we can learn.

Knowledge of past struggles is important, of the skills and requirements for effectiveness in nonviolent action, and of how to develop wise plans - plans that identify what needs to be done, why, when, how to do it, and how to counter and withstand repression from the opponents. This type of action applies the strengths of the population against the weaknesses of the oppressors. As the population’s strength grows through their action, they can move from small victories to large successes that transform the status quo, and shift the existing power imbalance that makes the injustice and violations possible.

We need to dedicate more resources to supporting these efforts because there is a worldwide hunger for this knowledge. At the Albert Einstein Institution, we are re-launching our work to better meet this demand and invite you all to join in those efforts.

In doing the work I do, I'm constantly struck by a deep sense of collective responsibility that we have as a global community. But fulfilling that responsibility requires that we do better at communicating the value of this type of action for our societies and the potential it holds in building a healthier, more just world. Because misconceptions remain in our field.

I remember giving a presentation to the aid agency of a European government where I spoke about how the international community can support the work of activists, specifically in Afghanistan. But there was concern about supporting this type of work. They said "what if nonviolent action is used against us, our interests." And I thought "what if it is." Wouldn't it be preferable if even our opponents use nonviolent means against us, because at the very least the struggles can be carried out in the public space with the opportunity to mobilize our own capabilities, and all without the destructiveness of war and violence.

So we have an opportunity and a responsibility to better understand how nonviolent struggle works, and how that information can be shared with the people who might use it as an alternative to both violence and the despair and cynicism that comes with powerlessness and hopelessness.

## **Afghanistan**

We live in a world of great violence, and we all know well the costs paid for that violence by regular people who are at the receiving end of the brutality of state violence and those who are the victims of the terrible consequences of violent resistance and insurgency. I was born in Afghanistan during the Soviet War and my family fled the country when I was four years old. So watching these more recent scenes of fear and desperation coming out of the country bring back the trauma and sense of helplessness that I experienced as a child. I've lived my whole life in the shadow of one brutal war after another. When people ask me when I came to the United States, I tell them that my family left Afghanistan "two wars ago." So I know well the costs of war, but I also understand the danger and trauma of helplessness and powerlessness that people living under oppression face.

But the hopeful thing to remember is that people are overcoming hopelessness and despair, and in the darkest corner of our globe, they are thinking, and planning and carrying out brave struggles on behalf of their communities. So our responsibility becomes clear, and that is to pay attention, to provide support, and to do what we can through our own work to enable them in their struggles.