

MOVEMENT BUILDING AND CIVIL RESISTANCE KEY RESOURCES FOR MOVEMENT ORGANIZERS

By Hardy Merriman

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Civil resistance movement organizers face many common challenges, including developing a unifying vision, building trust among different communities, eliciting widespread participation, coordinating coherent local and national strategies, training participants committed to nonviolent action, and withstanding repression.
- In many parts of the world there is also little information available about how to successfully organize civil resistance movements, and virtually no infrastructure or standardized educational processes for learning about this field.
- It is remarkable that civil resistance movements have achieved a relatively high success rate in spite of these challenges. How effective might such movements be if movement organizers had greater support in their learning and work?
- In recognition of the current lack of resources available for organizers, a 20-hour (or less) self-led course is proposed, focused on learning fundamentals of building unity, strategic planning, and maintaining nonviolent discipline.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last century, people facing oppression around the world have increasingly organized their communities and struggled nonviolently to win rights, freedom, and justice.¹ These struggles have featured civil resistance—involving tactics such as strikes, boycotts, mass demonstrations, and many other nonviolent actions—and their impact has shaped

both domestic and international affairs.

In the U.S., examples include the Woman's Suffrage movement, the labor movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-nuclear movement, Act Up!, the anti-war movement, the immigrant rights movement, Black Lives Matter, the Moral Mondays movement, and others. Around the world, a vast number of other citizen-driven movements have also fought against corruption, violence, and impunity, and won women's rights, minority rights, democracy, environmental preservation and sustainability, and government and corporate accountability.

The organizers and leaders of these movements all face major challenges, among them:

1. *Developing a galvanizing, inclusive, and unifying vision*, by first listening to different communities to understand people's circumstances, grievances, and aspirations;
2. *Building networks of trust within and between communities* so that people can work together;
3. *Eliciting voluntary participation and mobilization* of people who may be afraid, demoralized, isolated from each other, and/or deeply impoverished;
4. *Developing local- and national-level strategies* to challenge powerholders and institutions, and ensuring that these local and national level strategies work in harmony;
5. *Spreading knowledge about how nonviolent struggle works*, and building people's skills in organizing and engaging in acts of civil resistance;
6. *Convincing people to maintain nonviolent discipline* and resist arguments that violence should be used, even when the movement's opponent uses violence.

These common challenges are exacerbated by the fact that movements often confront powerful adversaries who actively try to persecute the movement and its leaders. At the outset of the conflict, a movement's opponent often controls the information environment, has great access to material and human resources, and has a significant and professionalized capacity to engage in various forms of repression.

A further challenge, and in some cases the most significant one, is the fact that in many parts of the world there is little information available about how people can successfully organize civil resistance movements, and virtually no infrastructure or processes established to support learning about this field. Thus, many movement organizers rely on their own intuition and savvy, trial and error of lived experience (which can land them in prison), ad hoc interactions with others, and whatever relevant information they can find available in their language (assuming their government has not actively suppressed or censored it) about how to wage successful nonviolent struggle. In addition, many activists and organizers do this learning in their spare time, since movement organizing is often unpaid work.

Given this state of affairs, it is astonishing that nonviolent movements have achieved the gains that they have, and defied conventional wisdom in the process. The award-winning work of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan shows that nonviolent movements that struggled to achieve maximalist objectives (including changing governments, achieving self-determination, or expelling foreign occupiers) achieved success an average of 53 percent of the time versus 26 percent of the time for violent insurgencies.² In addition, when successful, these nonviolent movements resulted in democracies 57 percent of the time within five years after a transition, which is a far higher probability compared to other processes (such as transitions driven by civil war, foreign intervention, or top-down negotiations).³

This begs the question of how much more effective movements might be if there were greater infrastructure, processes, and information available to prepare organizers for the challenges of one of the toughest (and often under-appreciated) jobs in the world. Other vocations—whether doctors, lawyers, professors, school teachers, soldiers or military officers, engineers, builders, mechanics, business

managers, accountants, or others—provide:

- A *sustained and structured process*, that often lasts for years, of learning from educational resources, experiences, and mentorship;
- *Infrastructure* (i.e. schools, scholarships, and professional associations) to support learning, professional development and community building;
- A *standardized body of knowledge* drawn from research and practice that is systematically and regularly incorporated into the field;
- A *livable income* so that someone can practice their profession and hone their skills on a fulltime basis.

Yet most movement organizers have little to none of this kind of support.

A SHORT, SELF-LED COURSE

It is beyond the scope of this brief to outline fully how to address these issues, but here I offer some key educational resources for organizers to quickly immerse themselves in some fundamentals of waging effective civil resistance. There is a growing amount of educational material from both scholars and practitioners available in multiple languages (see <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource-library>), but in recognition of the lack of time and money that most organizers face, I designed this list to be reviewed in under 20 hours and at a cost of less than \$50. Thus, I am knowingly overlooking many good and worthwhile resources to keep the time and financial commitment low.

The list is structured to address three of the key attributes of successful nonviolent movements:

1. Unity
2. Strategic planning
3. Nonviolent discipline

The resources cited include both scholarly and practitioner sources. My work for nearly 15 years has been in the realm of civil resistance education and thus I am recommending some works to which I or my organization have contributed, because I think they provide a useful synthesis of ideas that can be quickly accessed by organizers.

UNITY

Key resources to review:

1. [Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements](#), by Bill Moyer, with JoAnn McAllister, Mary Lou Finley and Steven Soifer | Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2001.

Cost: US \$19.95

Pages: 1-98 (approximately 6.5 hours)

Bill Moyer's discussion of four leadership types and skillsets required for a successful movement and his identification of eight stages of movement development give organizers perspective on where their movement is, how to work with the different voices within their movement, and how to build unity among different kinds of people.

2. [CANVAS Core Curriculum: A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle](#) (PDF 14.5mb) by Srdja Popovic, Slobodan Djinic, Andrej Milivojevic, Hardy Merriman, and Ivan Marovic. | Belgrade, Serbia: Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), 2007.

Cost: Free online

Pages: 14-19 (approximately 10 minutes)

This brief chapter and exercise make an essential point: in order to build unity, one must listen to and understand a wide range of people in society. This understanding goes beyond just their political views and includes knowing about people's daily lives—including what they worry about, hope for, and struggle with, and what activities and attributes make their lives meaningful and fulfilling. All of this is relevant to developing an effective, inclusive, and galvanizing "vision of tomorrow" for a movement.

3. ["The Prehistory of a Coalition: The Role of Social Ties in Win Without War"](#) by Catherine Corrigan-Brown and David S. Meyer in *Strategic Alliances: Coalition Building and Social Movements* by Nella Van Dyke and Holly J. McCammon (eds.), | Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Cost: US \$27.50

Pages: 3-18 (approximately 1 hour)

There are many chapters in this book that are worth reading. The chapter above shows that coalitions form and thrive when different groups: a) trust each other and b) understand how their counterparts work. Thus coalitions form out of social relationships where trust and knowledge of the other side are cultivated over a significant period of time. This means that if a group wants to form a coalition with other groups, it must consider this a long-term process, based on more than just shared political goals, and it must begin reaching out to and actively getting to know other groups, cultivating friendships, and assigning people whose primary responsibility it is to cultivate and maintain the coalition.

4. [March on Washington speech](#) (aka "I Have a Dream" speech) by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963

Cost: Free online

Viewing length: Approximately 17 minutes

Two fundamental communication challenges faced by activists are to:

1. Speak out and challenge mainstream thinking by highlighting issues that may not be widely-known or supported by the general public. Doing this may also involve an activist emphasizing their identity as part of an oppressed and/or minority group;
2. Bridge the activist's identity, issues and/or concerns with mainstream values, symbols, narratives, or common interests so that the general public feels some point of connection.

One of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s great strengths was his ability to accomplish both of these goals—to express certain African American experiences and grievances as distinct from those of the white majority in the U.S., while at the same time building a bridge to the majority through the identification of shared values, symbols, narratives, and interests. There is a reason why the "I Have a Dream" speech remains famous.

5. [The South African Freedom Charter](#) Adopted by the African National Congress on June 25-26, 1955

Cost: Free online

Reading time: Approximately 10 minutes

The Freedom Charter was a document designed to unify people of all races and backgrounds around a vision of a post-Apartheid South Africa. It was the result of the African National Congress (ANC) sending tens of thousands of volunteers around the country to speak with individuals and communities about their aspirations, and was formally adopted by the ANC in 1955. It served as a basis of unity for anti-Apartheid resistance for nearly the next four decades, and continued to be a basis for unity even in the post-Apartheid era, with some demands formally enshrined in the new South African Constitution.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Key resources to review:

1. [CANVAS Core Curriculum: A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle](#) (PDF 14.5mb) by Srdja Popovic, Slobodan Djinic, Andrej Milivojevic, Hardy Merriman, and Ivan Marovic. | Belgrade, Serbia: Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), 2007

Cost: Free online

Pages: 32-35, 46-50, 68-81, 86-95 (~90 min.)

The fundamentals of how civil resistance works and a framework for understanding strategy are laid out in simple language in these pages. The ideas are essential building blocks for strategic planning.

2. [“The Need for New Tactics”](#) (PDF 113kb) by Douglas A. Johnson from *New Tactics in Human Rights: A Resource for Practitioners*, | Minneapolis: The Center for Victims of Torture, March 2004

Cost: Free online

Pages: 12-18 (approximately 25 minutes)

This short piece includes many valuable strategic insights about how movements can innovate, maintain the initiative and momentum against their adversaries, and expand their capabilities to engage in diverse and effective tactics.

3. [“The Checklist for Ending Tyranny”](#) (PDF 168kb) by Peter Ackerman and Hardy Merriman in *Is Authoritarianism Staging a Comeback?*, Mathew Burrows and Maria J. Stephan (eds.), | Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council,

2015

Cost: Free online

Pages: 63-78 (approximately 45 minutes)

This chapter outlines six key attributes (with case examples) of effective nonviolent movements that activists can use as a “checklist” to gauge their movement and to overcome confusion and disorientation in conflict.

4. [“Backfire Basics”](#) (PDF 1.5mb) by Brian Martin

Cost: Free online

Pages: 1-4 (approximately 15 minutes)

The scholar Brian Martin identified a succinct five-step process to explain how powerholders attempt to reduce outrage about their use of repression against dissidents, and how movements can reverse these steps in order to increase outrage and cause repression to backfire against powerholders. For those who are interested, Martin has also posted a short book on the topic for free download called the [Backfire Manual: Tactics Against Injustice](#), Sparsnäs, Sweden: Irene Publishing, 2012.

NONVIOLENT DISCIPLINE

Key resources to review:

1. [“People are in the streets protesting Donald Trump. But when does protest actually work?”](#) by Erica Chenoweth | washingtonpost.com, November 21, 2016

Cost: Free online

Reading time: Approximately 10 minutes

2. [“How the world is proving Martin Luther King right about nonviolence”](#) by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan | washingtonpost.com, January 18, 2016

Cost: Free online

Reading time: Approximately 10 minutes

Both of the above short articles equip organizers with key arguments and important research findings about how civil resistance works and why civil resistance is more effective than violence. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan are leading scholars and researchers in the field of civil

resistance, and their work is available in more depth in the highly recommended book [Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict](#).

3. “[Nonviolent Discipline and Violent Flanks](#)” presentation by Erica Chenoweth and Philippe Duhamel | ICNC Summer Institute

Cost: Free online

Viewing length: Approximately 1 hour

A presentation drawing on scholarship and practitioner insights about why nonviolent discipline is important and practical methods for how movements can maintain it.

4. [Making or Breaking Nonviolent Discipline in Civil Resistance Movements](#) (PDF 5.7mb) by Jonathan Pinckney | Washington, DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2016,

Cost: Free online

Pages: 1-75 (approximately 5 hours)

This short book reviews the scholarly literature about nonviolent discipline, tests several hypotheses using quantitative methods, includes case studies, and offers findings about how movements maintain nonviolent discipline and the challenges of doing so.

FURTHER RESOURCES

The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict has educational resources on movement organizing and nonviolent civil resistance in English and many other languages available at <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource-library/>. Numerous other good organizations that also provide educational resources and training can be found at <https://www.umass.edu/resistancestudies/resources>.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Erica Chenoweth, “Trends in Civil Resistance and Authoritarian Responses” in *Is Authoritarianism Staging a Comeback?*, Mathew Burrows and Maria J. Stephan (eds.), Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council, 2015, p. 54.
- 2 Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict”, *International Security*, volume 33, issue 1.
- 3 Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, New York: Columbia University Press 2011, p. 215.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

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Hardy Merriman is President of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC). His work focuses on how grassroots civil resistance movements around the world can successfully fight for rights, freedom, and justice. He presents widely to scholars, practitioners, and members of civil society and has contributed to the books [Is Authoritarianism Staging a Comeback?](#) (2015), [Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East](#) (2010) and [Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential](#) (2005). He has also written about [the role of nonviolent action in countering terrorism](#) and co-authored [A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle](#), a training curriculum for activists.