

## When Nonviolent Direct Action is Useful... ...And When it's Not

Images of nonviolent direct action find their ways to the pages of history books, the columns of newspapers and blogs, the nightly news. These events can be iconic and seem like what a movement is – e.g. ACT UP shutting down the Food and Drug Administration in the late 1980s in response to the AIDS crisis *or* lunch counter sit-ins, sparked by young black activists in North Carolina in 1960. Today, accounts of resistance to the fall-out of the housing crisis often include images of the Occupy Our Homes' squats across the country.



Movements are made of much more than these demonstrations of power. Nonviolent direct action is one tool in a much bigger tool box of tactics and strategy. This is best used if we know when nonviolent direct action is useful and when it's not. Here are a few examples:

### **Nonviolent Direct Action is useful when...**

- ▶ it is a part of a larger campaign—in particular, when the action is geared toward pressuring an individual (the “target”) to take a specific action;
- ▶ it builds power—in particular, when it grows or strengthens the group through skill-building, community-building, and commitment to the campaign or through inspiring others to join the group;
- ▶ it escalates a campaign;
- ▶ the public can understand why it's happening—both through clear messaging (“we want safe drinking water”) or and when the action communicates the message of the campaign (i.e. we are bringing water to the EPA's doorstep to encourage them to do their job and inspect water for contaminants from mountaintop removal run-off);
- ▶ it is planned, trained for, and debriefed.

### **Nonviolent Direct Action is *not* useful when...**

- ▶ an expectation of “victory” is created around the action itself—that is, when those taking the action expect a decision-maker to decide in their favor during the course of the action;
- ▶ the action is taken as a one-time act without additional pressure or part of a campaign;
- ▶ there is no clear audience or that audience is not paying attention to the action;
- ▶ formal channels of institutional pressure have not been tried first (e.g. when it is used as an initial tactic);
- ▶ the purpose (messaging & action “logic”) of the action is not clear to the public;
- ▶ there isn't adequate support for the physical safety of those taking the action;
- ▶ it is no longer nonviolent and turns off allies.

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