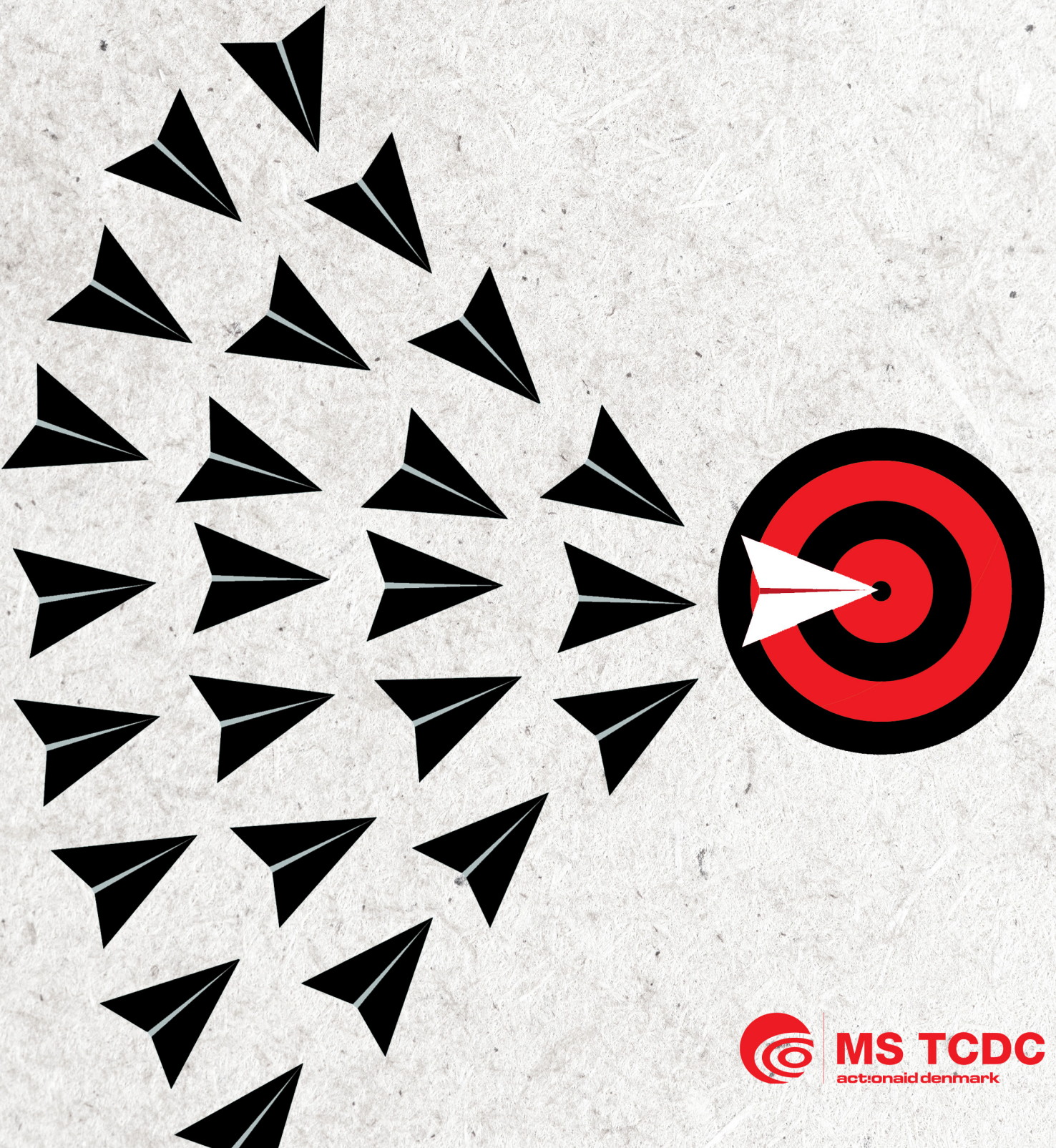


MS TCDC | Position Paper on Direct Action

Written by Merab Ingabire, Phil Wilmot, & C. Shushok
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WHAT IS DIRECT ACTION AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Wealthy men were pillaging the forests of Amuru District, Northern Uganda, commissioning trucks to export charcoal by night, and circumventing the vigilance of the area's residents. Youth of Amuru raised their complaints about this deforestation and profiteering to local government authorities and political leaders. Despite this mass advocacy by the people, the so-called "duty-bearers" gave them the cold shoulder. Some of these authorities were even implicated in the deforestation. Obviously they wouldn't take any meaningful action against their own profits.

The youth decided to take matters into their own hands. If they couldn't rely on a third party — government leaders in this case — they could stop the charcoal trade themselves. They went out at night, erected roadblocks, and offloaded hundreds of sacks of charcoal from trespassing trucks. They redistributed the charcoal taken from their communities back to local schools, health centers, and other public institutions. They began to reforest their native woodlands.

Amuru's youth learned the power of direct action — taking action directly without voluntarily relinquishing their power to a third party (like a government body, court, or organization) to intervene on their behalf. To use the words of David Graeber, a leading theorist on direct action and author of the dense movement tome *Direct Action: An Ethnography*,

"Direct action is the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authority, on acting as if one is already free."

Therefore, it is important to distinguish between protest and direct action. Not every protest is a direct action. Protests which persuasively call upon third parties like state authorities to do something on behalf of society are not usually direct actions.

Direct action can sometimes be intertwined with civil disobedience, although the two are not synonymous. In the historical case of the Indian Salt March, Gandhi famously walked to the ocean to create salt, violating the laws of Britain's colonial administration. It is not always legal or accepted to practice direct action, but Gandhi and others saw their own self-governance as a force capable of (and morally obliged to) transcending state law and other "less legitimate" forces of governance.

But direct action is not always defiant. We practice it every day as individuals and as communities. We decide with full autonomy to rise from our beds and brush our teeth. We decide to plant gardens and cook together. We do not usually appeal to third parties to rule us on such matters — to do so would be ludicrous. The fact that direct action is so normal to our existence that to practice anything else would be laughable, is an obvious indication that direct action is in its very essence human. That national governments, foreign companies, and other authoritarian powers can claim authority over our lives and get away with doing so is utterly preposterous. Often, they even do so with our willful consent.

This position paper does more than grant us permission to brush our teeth or plant a communal garden, however. As the forces of fascism rise, simple human activities like reclaiming charcoal that has been stolen from our communities' forests will require much risk-taking, courage, and organizing. Our investments of time, energy, and money into lobbying

through the mechanisms of liberal social democracy are becoming increasingly unreliable. In a world transitioning toward autocracy and governance by billionaire interests (and in many ways, already manifesting these dystopian nightmares), we must think beyond traditional advocacy strategies. Direct action is the most pressing approach to adopt. It requires relatively little money and people, yet it can make immense tangible shifts within a short span of time. Mainstreaming direct action in our strategies for social and political change will multiply our impact in nurturing a more progressive and liberated world.



Direct action across ActionAid programs

In the 1990s, ActionAid was one of the first major INGOs to mainstream Paulo Freire's problem-posing education model in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The methodology has scaled across the world, generating dialogue among oppressed peoples who cooperatively develop actions that often directly confront the crises they face.

The inaugural 2019 Global People Power Forum, organized in collaboration with the ActionAid Global Secretariat, held several sessions on creative direct action — one organized by ActionAid Italy advocating for ActionAid staff understanding themselves as frontline direct action practitioners, one led by ActionAid-supported movement Solidarity Uganda which practices direct action among each of its dozens of chapters across Uganda's diverse kingdoms, and one on direct action strategizing facilitated by ActionAid partner Beautiful Trouble, a global movement-support collective which also runs the Get Up Rise Up Direct Action fund. This fund — like several others of its kind — offers microgrants to direct action practitioners all over the world, including dozens of partners connected to the ActionAid federation. Various ActionAid national offices have supported the practice of large-scale direct actions, including occupations, sit-ins, creative disruptions, strikes, and other direct action tactics.

Despite the now-routine utilization of the unique power of direct action, the ActionAid federation remains without a clear adopted articulation or stance on the use of direct action. As a kind of “think tank” for the federation, TCDC offers this position paper as a starting point.

Why is direct action often more effective than traditional advocacy?

As fascism grows, diplomacy weakens and historically reliable bureaucracies crumble alongside the once-con-vivial fabric of society. While advocacy is certainly not obsolete, its impact lessens as authoritarian powers consolidate themselves, including in parts of the world traditionally thought to be social democracies.

This has left large swaths of civil society wondering what to do when encountering apparent dead ends. When there is no political will (or worse yet, a presence of flagrant hostility) from those wielding political and economic power, what measures can we take to create the change we wish to see in our communities? In our years of researching and practicing alternatives to traditional advocacy, we have come to understand direct action as a powerful answer to this question.

Direct action carries greater likelihood of victory because it does not legitimate the supposed authority of those with more money and formal political power. It does not kneel to ask permission. Instead, it puts such powerful actors on the defense. Many direct actions have brought such actors to the negotiation table over matters where they had once refused to budge. In the case of Amuru cited above, government leaders began arresting charcoal dealers and taking steps to address deforestation, once youth leveraged tactics that directly disrupted charcoal trade. In a bid to salvage the reputation of the ruling party from the youth that had

embarrassed him, dictator Yoweri Museveni then issued an Executive Order putting an end to the charcoal trade in these jurisdictions.

Direct action forced the hand of the country's highest office, in addition to directly shutting down the charcoal trade in the short term. When executed with precision and strategy, direct action has the potential to galvanize the masses toward the realization of a society where freedoms and rights are not just ideals but lived experiences for all.



WHAT ABOUT THE RISKS?

Despite the growing recognition of the transformative power of direct action among activists, there persists a pervasive apprehension towards organizing such actions due to the associated risks.

While the impact of direct action in challenging oppressive systems and catalyzing social change is widely acknowledged, the fear of personal and collective consequences often acts as a significant barrier, limiting its widespread adoption and effectiveness.

This complex interplay between recognition of direct action's power and the apprehension stemming from its risks underscores the need for comprehensive support systems, which include funding and education to empower activists and mitigate the challenges they face in pursuing this impactful form of resistance.

Still, there is no clear antidote for our current crisis of courage, nor for the dopamine-infused nihilism that plagues our distracted historical moment. Even without a clear antidote, we must commit ourselves to growing the courage and passion of our institutions, our partners, and ourselves. One good sign is that we have witnessed the contagious nature of courageous action. Courage begets courage, both within the self and within and across our communities.

STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR DIRECT ACTION

When an organization has committed to mainstreaming direct action in its programming, a major step has been taken toward a more just future.

But this commitment is not a light one. It opens new risks and challenges. Direct action is antithetical to the liberal international order which many of our institutions seek to entrench (consciously or not). It will be met with opposition by staff members and partners motivated by self-preservation.

Regular conversations on values will be required to shift attitudes and values in the workplace. Generally speaking, those with more privilege are likely to be more averse to direct action; they have more to lose. Organization leaders must take care to navigate conversations around social class and other power dynamics, even as they articulate direct action as a common good for all.

Finally, we recommend that no lesser than 20% of campaign and activity budgets be designated for direct action, with experienced task forces (usually composed of non-staff direct action practitioner-advisors) invited to support this shift in approach.

A change in partnerships may also be in order, depending on context. Efforts to map practitioners of direct action will need to take place where no such partners have existed prior. (It is very difficult to convince those who have not practiced direct action to mainstream it. It is much more effective to offer support to those who already practice direct action.)

HOW TO RECEIVE OUR SUPPORT

The LGA team at TCDC wants to be supportive to you in adopting the tenets outlined within this paper. Write to us as at wilmotp@mstcdc.or.tz, kamandaum@mstcdc.or.tz, and karamagia@mstcdc.or.tz.



MS TCDC
act:onaiddanmark

www.mstcdc.or.tz