

THE NEED FOR NEW TACTICS

By Douglas A. Johnson

The modern human rights movement has made enormous strides in the past few decades in the advancement of the human rights ideal and the establishment of specific protections. The movement created new international conventions condemning torture and protecting the rights of women and children, and developed an international consensus regarding the definition of legitimate political activities that deserve protection and support. Political prisoners have been protected from harm, and many have been freed. And in many nations, sophisticated institutions have been developed to promote adherence—on both domestic and foreign policy levels—to international human rights standards. We cannot overstate how important are these accomplishments or how difficult they were to achieve.

Three tactics, predominantly, led to these advancements: 1) setting international norms that created a body of conventions, treaties and standards; 2) monitoring compliance to these standards; and 3) denouncing or shaming government actions and inaction when the standards were violated. Over the years, the infrastructure and skills these approaches demand have grown dramatically.

It is clear that these tactics have brought about tremendous advances and thus should continue to be supported and pursued. It is equally clear that there are great limits to what we can accomplish in this way and that these approaches are not, in and of themselves, enough to solve seemingly intractable human rights problems.

Consider the problem of torture. There are, for example, more international conventions and standards established, more constitutional protections, and national legislation against torture than any other single human rights abuse. There is more monitoring of torture, not only by the infrastructures of treaty bodies and national and international human rights non-governmental organizations. Add to this capacity the creation of over 250 treatment centers for torture survivors around the world, each of which brings medical resources to bear on documenting torture in thousands of victims, thereby elevating the forensic capacity to document torture far beyond any other issue. And the broad consensus, coupled with far surpassing documentation, mean that torture is the most denounced of all abuses.

Yet, when Amnesty International launched its third international campaign against torture in 2000, it concluded that torture was as widespread then as it was when the organization launched its first global campaign in 1974.

In the past decade alone, we have witnessed human rights violations shocking in their scope— in Bosnia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, or any of the over 150 countries that still perpetrate or allow torture. I must state the obvious: *something is not working*.

It is the contention of this workbook that advancing human rights requires the creation of a broader human rights field, one that incorporates many more people and sectors of society than are currently engaged. It also requires the development of more comprehensive strategic approaches that can only be accomplished by using a far broader array of tactics than are currently in use.

All over the world dedicated human rights practitioners have begun this work: developing innovative approaches, building unexpected strategic alliances and learning from unexpected sectors. The New Tactics in Human Rights Project aims to bring these innovators together and inspire others with their work. This

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New Tactics in Human Rights is a program of the Center for Victims of Torture

workbook includes more than 75 stories of tactical innovation — by students, villagers and government commissioners; using sophisticated technology or whatever tools were already at hand; working to achieve goals as seemingly diverse as fair elections, clean water and freedom for political prisoners.

Individually these stories are inspiring. Together, in the workbook that follows, they represent a vision of what is possible to accomplish in human rights work.

The Limits of Current Strategy

The persistence of torture represents a significant challenge to the global community. When the three most common tactics of the human rights movement have not significantly reduced the incidence of torture, it is time to take a good look at the limits of current strategy. Some ideas of what those limits are emerged from a process I call “tactical mapping.”

Beginning with the relationship between the torturer and the victim, a group of 10 experts on torture diagrammed the relationships in which that fundamental perversion was embedded and which enabled the torture to occur. For example, torturers are usually members of a team with strong hierarchical leadership; they may also be embedded within a particular police station or military unit. We followed these relationships vertically to understand the chain of command that plans, organizes and funds the use of torture. But we also looked at each level horizontally, in order to understand what other possible influences and relationships might exist. For example, police stations also have civilians and physicians in attendance; they in turn, have relationships to the outside world that have some degree of control or influence over them. The initial map developed using this process diagrammed over 400 relationships, from the highly local to the international community.

We posited that every relationship on the diagram was a possible place to begin an intervention to interrupt or control the torturer/victim dyad. With the help of the diagram, we mapped the relationships that various tactics targeted and then the logical chain of relationships that they must influence in order to interrupt the torture/victim dyad (hence the name, the “tactical map”).¹ In doing so, we reached several important conclusions:

1. Most tactics were initiated on the far edges of the diagram, such as on the international level, meaning they had to work their way through many layers of other relationships before they indirectly affected the torturer/victim dyad. We speculated that this weakened or dissipated the force of the action.
2. Systems that use torture are often highly complex. Rather than a brittle, easily disrupted system, this complexity allows different institutions of the state which benefit from torture’s use to support each other. As one part of the system is attacked, other parts (such as the police structure, the system of prosecutors, the indifference of the judiciary) help protect the target and allow it to self-repair. We understood this to mean that the system will not yield to individual tactics. Rather, the system needs to be affected in multiple areas at the same time to create disequilibrium and prevent self-repair. This requires the use of multiple tactics working in conjunction as part of a more comprehensive strategy.
3. Most organizations in the field incorporate a limited number of tactics within their repertoire. Organizations tend to focus on a narrow set of tactics with little cooperation or collaboration between them. Not only does this limit its influence to very narrow sectors in a complex, mutually reinforcing system, but each organization, therefore, shapes its strategy based on this isolated capacity rather than on what is needed to affect the situation. We do what we can do, not what we need to do. We speculated that more coordination between tactics would make them more effective.
4. So many relationships on the diagram were unaffected or uninvolved in any form of current action. Their strengths and concerns were not called forth to action. We speculated that a much wider array of tactics would be needed to engage these potential actors.

¹ Tactical mapping was developed with support from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Advisory Panel for the Prevention of Torture and an in-kind donation from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

I believe these same conclusions hold true in other social and human rights issues. We need to find new ways of working together—and new ways of working—in order to create effective strategies of change. Some of the limits of current strategy require a macro-framework, where the limited resources of many could be more effectively combined together in a unified campaign. This might require what I call a “strategic convenor,” an institution or person with the moral credibility to pull us together in a new working relationship. But other aspects can be initiated by organizations that begin to test new ways of pressuring complex systems and stimulating action by new actors in the social web. This book is part of an overarching project, the New Tactics in Human Rights Project, to develop a dialogue within the human rights community about how that could come about, and to broadly illustrate some of the tools at our disposal for more effective action.

An Emerging Idea

The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) was founded in 1985 as the first comprehensive treatment facility for torture survivors in the United States. From the outset, CVT’s leadership conceived of its work as developing a new tactic of use to the human rights community. As we began to understand what tactics could emerge from our work, we also encouraged the development of other treatment programs for torture survivors. These developments demonstrated that these new institutions create new strategic opportunities for the human rights movement: restoring leadership stolen by repression, helping communities come to terms with the legacy of fear, and organizing the health care community as a new human rights constituency, among other outcomes. In the course of our work we also began to collect stories of other groups and people who were innovating outside the mainstream’s focus.

The New Tactics project was conceived in 1995. Shortly thereafter, CVT pulled together advisory groups in Turkey to explore the idea of a “best practices” symposium examining tactics used around the world to resolve—or more effectively struggle with—widespread human rights abuses. We wanted to focus on solutions rather than problems and to proceed from the idea that, at least in part, abuses continue because both civil society and government are stymied by a lack of specific examples of what to do. Although we believed that a problem orientation was useful, it was already being done quite well by the mainstream movement; but we believed that not enough attention was focused on effective solutions. There was already a lot of attention to the “what” but too little attention on the “how.”

The idea found resonance and respect with a broad sector of leaders in Turkey. In 1997, CVT formed a partnership with two Turkish organizations—Helsinki Citizens Assembly and the Human Rights Centre of the Turkish and Middle Eastern Institute for Public Administration—to develop the New Tactics in Human Rights Project. Systematic research on innovative tactics began in earnest in 1999 with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. We also established an International Advisory Committee of nine world leaders to provide visibility and political support and a Human Rights Working Group, composed of 21 human rights leaders in nearly every region of the world to help identify promising tactics and contribute to the project’s overall direction.

The Working Group met with members of the Turkish advisory group in 2000 in Istanbul. The former prime minister of Canada, the Right Honourable Kim Campbell, represented the International Advisory Committee and chaired the gathering. The group engaged in discussions on innovative approaches to advancing human rights, modeled cross-training approaches, and formulated action plans for the future work of the project.

Individuals who have worked in the human rights field for much of their lives commented on how the ideas and information shared at the meeting helped them think differently about opportunities to engage new people and approach matters from fresh perspectives. We have continued to build on this initial vision by providing tools—including this book and a web page, www.newtactics.org—and training human rights advocates in tactical innovation and strategic thinking through a series of regional cross-training workshops.

Framework of Our Thinking

Working at CVT over the past sixteen years taught me that there are important social and political implications in providing treatment to torture survivors. It reshaped my thinking about the assumed distinctions between preventing torture and caring for survivors. CVT staff discovered that the care of survivors is about recovering leadership and helping communities overcome the legacy of fear. We've found that the metaphor of healing creates safer political space that allows communities to gather, to work and to learn to take risks. Treatment centers like CVT bring new groups, such as educators, health care professionals and policy makers, into human rights work. And from our position as a treatment center we advocate for an end to torture and for policies and laws that will improve the lives of torture victims. Without framing it as such, in the early years at least, we were broadening the definition of human rights work and implementing new tactics.

The second experience that has framed my thinking on New Tactics was my role in the international baby food campaign in the 1970s and 1980s. In late 1976, when I headed a grass roots activist group working on hunger issues, with a program budget of \$500 a year, plus my own subsistence salary. A small group of us began working together across the country and created the Infant Formula Action Coalition. With those meager resources we launched a boycott against the world's largest food corporation, Nestle, to force changes in its marketing practices of breastmilk substitutes. We built a network of 300 American chapters; created a coalition of over 120 national endorsing organizations with over 40 million members; created the first grass roots international boycott, operating in 10 countries; formed the first transnational issue network, IBFAN, operating in 67 nations; became one of the first NGOs invited as equal participants with nations and corporations into a UN meeting and eventually negotiated the first and only corporate marketing code to emerge from the UN; and after damaging Nestle's revenue by about \$5 billion, signed a joint agreement with the company to change its marketing practices in alignment with the international code—an agreement that was hailed as “the most important victory in the history of the international consumer movement.”

I am proud of that campaign and of nearly a decade of work. But, like all beginners, we made a few mistakes. I can trace many of those mistakes to my limited knowledge of tactics. For example, I initially confused tactics with strategy. Strategic thinking is really about how you make the best of what's available to you, and since, in my mind, I had only one tactic available to me, this was, perhaps, inevitable. As with so many leaders who emerge at the grass roots level trying to right a wrong, I began at the level of an activity, graduated to thinking about tactics, and struggled to understand how to shape strategy, with only limited notions of the tools that were available to me.

As I have had more experience in shaping the strategy of an organization, it has become clearer to me that the more we understand about tactics, the more flexibility we have to set new strategic directions. I am not arguing, then, that tactical thinking or training supersedes strategic thinking, but rather that tactical development enriches strategic thought.

Goals, Strategy and Tactics

While a focus on tactics is essential, it is not an organizations' first priority. Organizations must first set broad goals that reflect the values and beliefs of its founders, leaders, or members. These basic goals incorporate the mission and purposes of the organization, and they must be clear in order to focus planning. An organization will also need to establish intermediate goals that more closely state what the organization will accomplish over time. These intermediate goals must embed a strategic vision of what is feasible to accomplish.

There is nothing mysterious about strategy, though it is often difficult to think strategically. Strategy is not a single decision, but rather a confluence of decisions: the selection of key objectives and appropriate targets, an understanding of the constituencies and resources needed, and decisions on which tactics to use and when. More than two thousand years ago, Sun Tzu taught that strategy emerges from understanding the

adversary (what are its goals, strategy, strengths and weaknesses), understanding ourselves (who are our allies, what are our strengths and limits), and understanding the terrain (where will the battle be fought). The adversary's tactics are a key component to his strategy, and knowledge of such tactics aids us in counteracting them. What we can accomplish, including which tactics we know and which we can successfully implement, will affect the formation of our strategy. Therefore, tactical thinking is critical component of strategic thinking.

A tactic is a specific action that one takes within a strategy. Tactics are the ways that we organize our resources to effect change in the world. A tactic may be an activity, a system or even an institution in one situation and a technique in another context. Tactics will manifest themselves differently depending on the size, capability and resources available. Tactics embody how one goes about making change, while a strategy involves decisions on which tactics to use, which targets deserve focus and which resources can be employed. Our knowledge of tactics also shapes the strategy we choose.

Tactical thinking is essential to effective struggle for human rights. Let me describe this reasoning in more detail.

1. What we know how to do influences what we think is possible to do; tactics help determine strategy.

I don't want to be overly deterministic here. Innovations happen all through human history whenever someone creates a new response to a problem. Nonetheless, human history is full of examples where the same solution is tried over and over again without success, or where a new tactic overcomes an old one. Two good examples come from military history: 1) the development of the Greek phalanx, which created a system of fighting that overcame the traditional reliance on disorganized but overwhelming horse warriors, and 2) the incorporation of the long bow into the English armies of Henry V, which overcame the heavily armored knights. Tactical innovation paved the way to new strategic opportunities.

Similarly, when our thinking about how we can act is narrowly defined, we restrict our views of what is possible to accomplish. I remember rejecting lots of good advice during the baby food campaign because I did not know how to carry out the activities suggested—and couldn't afford to pay the salary of those who did!

2. Different tactics are effective against different targets.

Not all tactics affect all targets equally. Letter-writing campaigns aimed at democratic governments will get a different reaction than the same number of letters to autocratic governments. An economic boycott requires a target concerned with its economic condition with a set of vulnerabilities that can be touched by the participants.

We must learn to tailor our tactics to our targets, by finding those that will have the fullest impact possible. When targets of concern are unaffected by our tactics, we must innovate tactics that engage those targets.

3. Different tactics appeal to different constituencies.

Each of us has our own learning style. Good teachers recognize this and help us learn by changing their teaching tactics. We need the same attitude toward social change tactics in order to engage the broadest range of people in human rights work.

Some people find picketing in front of a torturer's home a very frightening tactic; others find letter writing too removed from where the change is needed. We can debate who is right, or we can recognize that people respond differently to a tactic based on their notions of causation, their tolerance for risk, the time they have available, or how they process information.

If the human rights community responds by offering only one or two tactics to engage the public, we will

appeal only to a narrow constituency to whom those tactics make sense. For example, legal tactics are notoriously difficult to use to engage wide sectors of the population: they tend to be long-term and esoteric efforts in which there is little for anyone beyond a small group of professionals to do. In addition to legal tactics, we need to employ others that give more people the chance to be participants rather than observers.

In cultures that have experienced repression people have learned to withdraw from public life. To engage constituencies in cultures such as these we need to offer tactics that appeal to different risk tolerances and different views of social change.

4. Tactical flexibility is the source of surprise.

As we repeat the same tactics over again, our adversaries learn to deal with them and contain their impact.

When we initiated the boycott against Nestle, the company overreacted and made many mistakes that ended up strengthening the boycott. But as the campaign wore on, Nestle developed the expertise to smooth over the criticism and implemented effective counteroffensives. We were constantly shifting the application of our tactics to throw them off balance so their counteroffensives would be ineffective.

The fact that human rights continue to be violated underscores the existence of smart, powerful adversaries with substantial resources. One can imagine the power of the first letter-writing campaign from Amnesty International because the tactic was so surprising. But we can also imagine how, after 30 years, most states have developed learned to bureaucratize a response and protect themselves from that tactic.

Creating surprise keeps the adversary off balance. This can lead to mistakes that undermine their position. It can also lead to learning, as the target of the tactic may gain new insight or come to understand the need for positive change. Inflexibility leads to repetition in our thinking, as well as the adversary's. Flexibility promotes learning by both parties.

5. Tactics teach participants and observers about how to engage in the world.

The first baby food campaign (1975 to 1985) created a new way of conducting global politics. It was a challenge because each stage of the campaign created new precedents; there was no one available to coach us on what to do next. Since then other international campaigns have formed and operated within the same framework and were able to move much more quickly. Think of the international campaign to ban landmines, which accomplished its goals in 18 months, when INFACT took us nearly 10 years.

I think of this phenomenon as something similar to a musician learning a new piece of music. As we practice, the muscles learn how to move, giving the brain the opportunity to plan subtle variations and improvements. As we practice, it gets easier.

Another example comes from Uruguay: A provision of the Uruguayan constitution that allowed a public referendum to overturn parliamentary legislation had never been used in 70 years. The Uruguayan human rights community dusted off this provision and collected petitions from 30 percent of eligible voters to try to overturn the impunity of those who tortured and killed citizens during the dictatorship. Although the referendum then failed by a narrow margin, the Uruguayan population learned a new way of doing politics; the referendum was used eight more times in the next 12 years.

6. Tactics are the training systems for engaging participants and allies in the organization's work.

Some tactics may be short-term (such as a march), some longer-term (such as a boycott). But as systems of acting, all of them require planning, coordination and direction. They create opportunities for many other citizens to be involved, to learn and to become more committed to the work of the organization or campaign. Involvement on a tactical level is excellent training ground for younger or newer staff and

volunteers.

When CVT first proposed introducing the Torture Victims Relief Act² in the U.S. Congress (a legislative tactic), we used the opportunity to engage other human rights organizations, the religious community and other potential allies. Through their engagement, they became more knowledgeable about the work of torture treatment programs and began to incorporate our understanding of torture into their language.

Tactical innovation is critical to the successful implementation of human rights around the globe. By expanding our thinking both tactically and strategically the human rights community has the opportunity to be more effective. In summary,

1. A narrow range of tactics leads to narrow constituencies; a broader range of tactics appeals to, and involves, broader constituencies.
2. An over-reliance on any single tactic leads to applying it in the wrong circumstances and missed opportunities to expand the strategic targets of action; flexible tactical thinking creates the opportunity for refined strategic targeting.
3. An overused tactic encourages the adversary to systematize a response and makes it easier for adversaries to defend their position; tactical flexibility creates surprise and learning.

We do not intend this workbook to be a “cookbook” for creating strategies or to promote any particular set of tactics. The capacities of a group, tolerance for risk, analysis of the adversary or adversarial conditions and the context in which the tactics will be used will all influence these choices.

Instead we hope to inspire human rights practitioners to think strategically and to increase their own vocabulary of tactics by presenting a small glimpse of the scope of innovative work being done around the world. And we challenge ourselves, within governments and human rights institutions, to invest in the development of new strategic tools that will enable us to work together more effectively.

Note: This article is available for free download or upon request in eighteen additional languages

Arabic العربية

Armenian հայերէն

Bengali বাংলা

Chinese 中文

Farsi (Persian) فارسی

French français

Hebrew עברית

Indonesian bahasa Indonesia

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Polish polski

Russian русский

Serbo-Croatian Српске-хрватски

Spanish español

Turkish Türk

Ukrainian Український

Urdu اردو

Uzbek Ўзбек

² The Torture Victims Relief Act is U.S. legislation designed to develop a comprehensive American strategy against torture and provide support for the rehabilitation of torture victims around the world. The bill authorized \$31 million dollars for the treatment of victims of torture.