

Nonviolence Under the Microscope

A multipurposed study of nonviolent action in South Sudan

Abstract

Nonviolent action is a historically pervasive, yet misunderstood phenomenon. Despite its success stories, of which Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. remain the most famous examples, nonviolent action has been overlooked in literature, especially by peace and conflict scholars. Adopting Vinthagen's novel theoretical framework on the case of nonviolent action in South Sudan, this paper aims at contributing to general understandings of nonviolent action. Through interviewing experienced South Sudanese nonviolent activists and complementing with secondary data, a comprehensive picture of nonviolent action in South Sudan is painted. Analysed with a reflexive methodology and an abductive reasoning, the picture is further nuanced. Both Vinthagen's theory and the empirical case are then refined in relation to each other. The result is equally as holistic, as ambivalent. Nonviolent action, as understood from the South Sudanese context, is mainly a constructive normative regulation, in which training, protests and persuasion are the main nonviolent methods used. Vinthagen's theory helps conceptualize the empirical case, although this highlights several gaps within the theory. Finally, the reinterpretation of the theory and the empirical case culminates in a refined understanding of nonviolent action in South Sudan as both faltering and promising.

Key words: nonviolent action, South Sudan, Vinthagen, reflexivity, abduction

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1 Introduction

1.1 Contextual background

Mahatma Gandhi introduced the world to the force of nonviolent action through the struggle for Indian independence. Gandhi's understanding of nonviolent action was both spiritual and strategic. He upheld the nonviolent lifestyle as a normative ideal, whilst practicing nonviolent action which to him was the tool of strong individuals (Hefner, 2004). Gandhi's thoughts continue to influence nonviolent action to this day, as "all theories of nonviolent disobedience refer back to him" (Vinthagen, 2015: 24). The next major historical figure utilizing nonviolent action was Martin Luther King Jr. who continued the nonviolent fight in the American Civil Rights Movement. King highlighted how nonviolent action can provoke the necessary conditions for dialogue and negotiations, linking nonviolent action with peacebuilding practice (Stephan & Pinckney, 2020). Since then, nonviolent action has been prevalent in use, yet seldom reached a legitimate recognition.

On this side of the millennium shift, the perhaps most notable nonviolent campaign is "the Arab Spring". During which, massive crowds took to the streets with demands of freedom and ending authoritarian governance. The most significant aspects were the various nonviolent actions through which this was performed (Batstone, 2014). Today, nonviolent protests are everywhere, with contemporary examples in Hong Kong, Iraq and Lebanon, amongst many others. In fact, recent trends reveal that nonviolent action is increasing and has taken over violent actions by a large margin as the most common form of civil resistance (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2016). Although, paradoxically, whilst growing in popularity, its success rate is falling drastically. The main reason for this is that authoritarian governments have developed sophisticated and systematic techniques for undermining and thwarting nonviolent action (Chenoweth, 2017).

Whilst omnipresent, nonviolent action remains a largely misunderstood social phenomenon (Sharp, 1973: 70-71). Whereas we will return to the specific understanding of nonviolent action adopted in this text in 2.1, for now, it is sufficient to understand that “[n]onviolent action (also sometimes referred to as people power, political defiance, and nonviolent struggle) is a technique of action for applying power in a conflict by using symbolic protests, noncooperation, and defiance, but not physical violence” (Albert Einstein Institute). A crucial detail here is that nonviolent action is not passive. It is an active technique, with an explicit goal to influence change (Sharp, 2012: 193).

Hitherto, literature on nonviolent action has predominantly adopted an instrumental approach focusing on the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns. The inherent potential of nonviolent action is important to emphasize, as scepticism towards it remains high. However, as mentioned, governments have adapted, and the picture today is much more complex. Literature is slowly catching up, diversifying its approaches to nonviolent action. Much is though needed for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

1.2 Purpose and research problems

Much literature reduces the purpose and contribution of research to finding a research gap. However, Gustafsson & Hagström (2018: 636-637) argue that relying solely on research gaps “underproblematizes” the relation to previous research on the topic, ignoring *why* the gap exists. Similarly, by not challenging existing literature, one risks accepting dominant theories and underlying assumptions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013: 50). Of course, if all research is based on challenging former literature, new theories or applications are discouraged. Silverman (1997: 25) provides an alternative standard for good qualitative research, focusing on credibility in the presented arguments and practical and theoretical significance of the research problem. Whereas these criteria are important, credibility is a subjective matter. Likewise, the practical or subjective significance of a research problem is not straightforward. One could argue their

research is relevant to a specific context or theory, but the nature and volume of the significance is impossible to know in advance.

As part of a reflexive approach, the purpose of this research is not reduced to aspects such as those mentioned above. It is multifaceted, and largely overlaps with Alvesson & Sköldbberg's (2018: 371) demands for good research. These are: empirical "arguments" and credibility; prioritization of the interpretation aspect of social phenomena; insightful empirical description; critical reflection of the political contexts of, and issues in, research; awareness of the ambiguity of language and discourses and its limited relation with an empirical reality; theory development through the mentioned issues.

For this paper then, the purposes of the research include but are not limited to: applying Vinthagen's seminal theory empirically; conducting qualitative studies on an understudied field, i.e. filling an academic gap; adding clarity to a largely misunderstood social phenomena; shedding light on an important conflict and resistance movement that lacks adequate coverage in international news and academia; highlighting the relevance and prospect for nonviolence both in South Sudan and theory; and applying abduction, an underutilized method in social sciences. To summarize, I seek to refine the understandings of both Vinthagen's theory and nonviolent action in South Sudan. Importantly, through combining various elements, my contribution will hopefully be multidimensional. Although, the exact nature of my contribution is impossible for me to discern.

Adopting a reflexive approach, I seek to analyse the situation of nonviolent action in South Sudan with the help of Vinthagen's theory of nonviolent action. Through interviewing civil society actors involved with nonviolent work and comparing it to relevant secondary data, I aim at refining the understandings of both the theory and the empirical case. This is done through a reflexive methodology and an abductive reasoning. In adopting this holistic approach, the numerous research problems can thus be tackled. The multifaceted purpose somewhat restricts the value of a research question, as the research problems are impossible to encapsulate in a single question. Nevertheless, the research will still revolve around the following overarching research question:

How can nonviolent action be understood from the South Sudanese context?

This rather wide question is then sub-divided to structure my analysis, and to tackle the various research problems. First, *how can Vinthagen's theoretical framework explain nonviolent action in South Sudan?* Second, *how can the interplay between the theory and the empirical case enlighten the understanding of nonviolent action both in South Sudan and in theory?*

2 Theory

2.1 Previous research on nonviolent action

Gene Sharp is by far the most influential name within nonviolent literature. In contrast to Gandhi's moral and normative view on nonviolent action, Sharp highlighted its practical benefits. One did not have to believe nonviolence was morally superior to violent means to use it, but simply see the effectiveness therein. In his seminal book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973), Sharp outlines 198 (!) methods of what he terms "strategic nonviolence". The methods range from protests and non-cooperation to embargos and international interventions. They have since been adopted by nonviolent activists globally. This influence has been mirrored in nonviolent literature, which to a large extent has focused on the effectiveness of nonviolent action. When facing repressive governments, nonviolent action were six times as likely to succeed as violent resistance (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008).

However, there are problems with this approach, and critique is mounting. When solely focusing on nonviolent action as a strategy, ignoring its goal, there is a risk of overlooking that nonviolent action can divide societies or incite violence, which has often been the case recently (Svensson, 2016).

Within peace and conflict literature, nonviolent action has remained an understudied social phenomenon. Chenoweth & Cunningham (2013: 272) has proposed three main reasons for this. First, violent conflicts have received the focus, as they are perceived as more urgent global issues. Second, there may exist a preconception that nonviolence is an especially difficult phenomena to study empirically, which has deterred interest. Third, nonviolent is associated with stereotypes such as "passive", "weak" or "activist". Similarly, Vinthagen (2015: 51) has argued that nonviolent studies suffer from several signs of a young field of

study, such as inarticulate use of theory and simplified description. Vinthagen argues this is mainly due to the lack of unanimity over the definition of the social phenomenon it tries to study. Although, the same could be applied to just about any social science discipline, albeit to a varying degree.

Nevertheless, there have been calls for incorporating nonviolence within wider peace and conflict literature (see eg. Svensson, 2016; Chenoweth & Cunningham, 2013), which this paper also aims at doing. There is a burgeoning body of peace and conflict literature covering nonviolence and attempting to fill that gap. Balcells & Justino (2014) reflects on the importance of combining micro and macro level of analysis when studying civil resistance in conflict settings. Mason & Falk (2016) have highlighted Palestinians' long, yet unacknowledged history of using nonviolent action. Nevertheless, there remains much research to be done if a more holistic and nuanced understanding of nonviolent action is to be achieved and incorporated into peace and conflict literature.

2.2 A theory of nonviolent action

The theoretical understanding of nonviolent action used in this text is based on Vinthagen's (2015) "A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works". In his book, Vinthagen aims at establishing the first grand theory of nonviolent action since Gene Sharp's influential "The Politics of Nonviolent Action" (1973). Sharp, and much else of nonviolent literature, is argued to base their understanding of nonviolent action on a simplistic model, reduced to a separation between morality and technique. Combining his central inspirations, Vinthagen aims at nuancing this picture and reaching a more holistic understanding of nonviolent action (Vinthagen, 2015: 49). More accurately, we can understand Vinthagen as a combination of Gandhi's spiritual ideal, Sharp's practical methods and additional modern sociological theories (mainly Habermas, 1984). The emerging understanding of nonviolent action is ambivalent and contradictory, both in theory and in practice. Based on how it has been adopted and performed historically, Vinthagen argues nonviolent action has an interconnected relationship with violence. It is interpreted as both *against violence*

and *without violence*: “[i]t is precisely through fighting violence in such a way that one refrains from using violence that the act becomes nonviolent” (Vinthagen, 2015: 11-12). *Against violence* and *without violence* are intrinsically intertwined, as they both presupposes the conceptual existence of the other one to function.

Importantly, *against violence* and *without violence* are analytical dimensions of nonviolent action, comparable with the practical terms of *nonviolent resistance* and *nonviolent construction*, respectively. *Nonviolent resistance* concerns “the undermining, hindrance, obstruction or resolution of ‘violence’ or ‘oppression’, where the activists themselves attempt to avoid using violence or oppression” (Vinthagen, 2015: 63). *Nonviolent construction* is “the development, training and support of the individual or collective ability to act and live without violence” (ibid). The ambition and specific methods of both also shift depending on one’s definition or experiences of violence and oppression. Yet this picture fails to conceptualise the rationale behind nonviolent actions, and how they work.

Hence, nonviolent action is then further defined through combining Jürgen Habermas’s (1984) action rationale typology with Gandhi’s conceptual terminology. The result is a dynamic four-part action rationale, combined with *nonviolent resistance* and *nonviolent construction*. The four nonviolent action types are: normative regulation, dialogue facilitation, utopian enactment and power breaking. *Normative regulation* is a way of building an alternative social world promoting nonviolence. It can both be seen as constructing a nonviolent social moral and ideal, as well as challenging a dominant culture of socially accepted or legitimized violence. *Dialogue facilitation* is various ways of promoting an open dialogue in society, attempting to manage different truth claims and disunity. It can be understood as attempts at establishing freedom of speech on equal grounds, and actively challenge dominant discourses from influential suppressors. *Utopian enactment* is the care of the adversary, refusing to kill or injure in the name of justice for fostering solidarity over divisions. Essentially, it is attempts at materialising ideal norms of humanity and equality, whilst undermining and breaking down enemy images. Lastly, *power breaking* is various methods of cooperation and resistance aimed at weakening oppressive power relations. It entails individual or collective methods of regaining power over their own actions and capacity to act, while simultaneously refusing and

breaking relationships of subordination (Vinthagen, 2015: 301-302). See Table 1. for an overview of the action types within the framework.

Nonviolent Action type	Nonviolent Resistance	Nonviolent Construction
Normative Regulation	Building a culture of resistance to socially legitimized violence.	Constructing and following a nonviolent morality and ideal.
Dialogue Facilitation	Producing methods undermining suppressive discourses.	Testing egalitarian forms of dialogue to promote an ideal speech situation.
Utopian Enactment	Resisting hate images through consequent contradiction.	Attempting utopian ideals of equality and friendship.
Power Breaking	Breaking power relations of subordination.	Regaining agency over one's actions as individual or joint empowerment.

Table 1. My overview of Vinthagen's theoretical framework of nonviolent action.

The table gives the appearance that nonviolent action can easily be discerned between these eight theoretical boxes. They are theoretical though, and nonviolent action remains an act. The boxes are rationales, showcased through various nonviolent actions. Combining the nonviolent action types, incorporating their resistant and constrictive side, produces an ideal version of nonviolence as *constructive resistance*. This is when nonviolence works best and is what activists should strive for. Withal, the framework is also built on intrinsic contradictions that may or may not be solvable. In fact, Vinthagen argues there exist inherent paradoxes within his theory, which can only be overcome temporarily. Vinthagen proposes consensus through dialogue as the remedy (Vinthagen, 2015: 310-319). However, I do not want to delve further into his hypothesis, as the theoretical framework remains the key tool in trying to understand nonviolent action in the South Sudanese context.

Vinthagen's theory remains conceptual in nature and prompt for empirical application. As of this publication, this appears deficient in literature. The only study I have found that adopts Vinthagen's theoretical framework is Sørensen's (2017) study of humour as a method of nonviolence in 20th century Sweden. Empirical application of this ground-breaking theory should thus prove fruitful for the development of this burgeoning field of studies.

Ultimately then, the four nonviolent action types, and the interplay between them, will be the basis for my application of Vinthagen's theory on nonviolent action in South Sudan. Through analysing the interviews and the complementary secondary material, I seek to delineate how well this theoretical framework can explain nonviolent action in South Sudan. As mentioned, the theoretical framework appears solid yet allows, in fact calls for, overlapping combinations of the action type. The structure of the analysis is formed around the four action types, yet the analysis will sporadically variate between the different action types.

3 Method and research design

3.1 Reflexive methodology and abduction

In tackling the research problems, Alvesson & Skoldberg's (2018) reflexive methodology has been adopted as an overarching framework. Reflexive methodology, or reflexivity, is new method of qualitative research, merging theoretical and practical aspects of research (Day, 2012). It rests on a critique of both positivist and post-positivist ontologies of theoretical and empirical research. Like much critical literature, the positivist notion of an objective social reality is rejected. Yet it does not confirm the postmodernism claims that the empirical reality should be ignored altogether, limiting the value of research to discourse and language (Alvessons & Skoldberg, 2018: 2-3). Good qualitative research can include empirical material, but this material does not mean anything on its own. Instead, it gains significance through the interpretations of the researcher; “[e]mpirical material should be seen as an argument in efforts to make a case for a particular way of understanding social reality” (ibid: 370; authors’ own italics). The analysis of nonviolent action in South Sudan in this paper is thus not an objective representation of reality, as one does not exist. Instead, the data gathered from the interviews and secondary material, and the subsequent interpretations of them, will reflect my understanding of nonviolent action in South Sudan.

Reflexivity’s aim of reaching this understanding is not an automatic process, however. It is through the subjective interpretations that we construct meaning and understanding of the analysed material, and thus the social reality (Steedman, 1991: 54). In fact, the main rationale behind reflexivity is in being aware and highlighting this process throughout the research. Through successively reflecting on the political, social and cultural aspects underlying our interpretations of the data, the researcher escapes dominant perceptions and theories. This way, new

perspectives and understanding can be reached (Alvesson & Sköldb​erg, 2018: 326). In many ways, this approach contains similarities with hermeneutics, which also highlights the value of differential interpretations (see eg. Outhwaite, 2015).

Reflexivity has been critiqued for being present in all research, as well as not guaranteeing high quality research by itself (Gabriel, 2015). To the first point, this comes back to the separation of reflection and reflexivity. Whereas “[a]ll research is in some sense reflective” (Alvesson & Sköldb​erg, 2018: 340), reflexivity is an explicit method in which its effect on the research is highlighted and interpreted. To the second point, Alvesson & Sköldb​erg makes no claim of reflexivity being enough for fruitful research and provide examples of more specific methods to pair up with reflexivity. In this paper, that method is abduction, which is what will be explained now.

Induction and deduction have generally been seen as the two mutually exclusively scientific modes of reason. Induction entails analysing many cases and discovering theoretical links that can explain a certain pattern or phenomena. Deduction is the opposite, drawing on established theories to explain individual cases. Yet all social science research cannot be confined to either one (Alvesson & Sköldb​erg, 2018: 4). The purpose of this paper is multifaceted, interested in the interconnection between theory, method and empirical case. Neither induction nor deduction is thus sufficient for answering the research problem. Instead, largely due to Alvesson & Sköldb​erg’s (2018) argumentation, I have opted for the abductive research logic, which has been recommended as an innovative case-study design (Meyer & Lunnay, 2013).

Abduction starts with an often-surprising empirical case that is interpreted from an overarching theoretical framework which explains the case in point. Both the theory and the empirical case is then re-interpreted in the light of each other, refining them through successive interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldb​erg, 2018: 4-5). Essentially, abduction is “a means of forming associations that enable the researcher to discern relations and connections that are not otherwise evident or obvious” (Meyer & Lunnay, 2013: 2). The purpose behind the method is thus to reach new understandings and perspectives that otherwise go unnoticed. As opposed to a deductive approach, I am interested in nuancing the understandings of both the theory and the empirical case, not just the case in point. Importantly, results reached through abductive reasoning include a level of uncertainty. Or

rather, part of the methodology is acknowledging that the results are a form of “most likely” or best explanation as of now (Dudovskiy, n.d.).

The main advantages of the chosen method for this paper revolves around its handling of theory and empiricism, and the successive development of the understandings of them both. As previously touched upon, Vinthagen’s theory is conceptual in nature and prompt for empirical application, which hitherto is lacking. Likewise, South Sudan remains largely understudied, especially nonviolence therein. Combined with abduction, reflexivity thus emerges as a promising method for conceptualising, and later refine, the understanding of both the theory and the empirical case.

3.2 Empirical case

Much of the motivation behind selecting a single-N case study design was a consequence of opting for an abductive research method, as explained in 3.1. In relation to this study, I will adopt Vinthagen’s theory on nonviolent actions in South Sudan. This means analysing how the theory can understand nonviolence actions in South Sudan, mainly through the four nonviolent action types. The empirical case will then either confirm or challenge Vinthagen’s theory, or both. The understandings of these analyses will then be reinterpreted in relation to each other, in an attempt at reaching new perspectives of the theory and the empirical case. For instance, Vinthagen’s theory might help delineate theoretical patterns in otherwise sporadic nonviolent actions in South Sudan. Likewise, the nonviolent actions might deviate from the four action types, or combine them in novel ways, calling for a refinement of Vinthagen’s theory.

Nonviolent action in South Sudan stands out for numerous reasons. The country’s “civic space is among the most limited in the world” (Stephan & Zaremba, 2019). Freedom House (n.d.) lists South Sudan as the third least free country in the world, worse than North Korea, only beaten by Tibet and Syria. Freedom of Assembly and Association is enshrined in the Interim Constitution from 2011 (Government of South Sudan), yet highly restricted in practice. Several

protests have been cancelled after warnings of deadly consequences from the government (Freedom House, 2020). Performing nonviolence under such conditions is not an easy task. If it can happen in South Sudan, and maybe even influence the government, then it points to a promising force in nonviolent action.

Furthermore, civil society inclusion has been identified as a key priority for ending the conflict in South Sudan. External voices from the African Union and the Troika countries (Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States of America) have expressed that sustainable peace is not achieved by way of military means, but through the inclusion of civil society actors in the peace talks (African Union, 2017; Government of Norway, 2018). Shedding light on, and reaching deeper understandings of, nonviolent action in South Sudan can thus prove helpful for the country's peace process.

Much nonviolence literature is based around data from the NAVCO datasets (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008; Chenoweth & Lewis, 2013; Chenoweth et al., 2018), which cover nonviolent actions until 2012. Even newer datasets (see eg. Chenoweth et al., 2019) have yet to deal with actions after 2013. Choosing a case study after that time period thus provide coverage of hitherto understudied nonviolent actions. As South Sudan gained independence in 2011, most South Sudanese nonviolent action thus falls in that research gap. This is without mentioning that South Sudan further shines in its absence within nonviolent literature.

Moreover, opting for a contemporary case study arguably distances this study from the mentioned instrumental approach that has dominated nonviolence studies. Of course, one could still focus on the effectiveness of nonviolent actions when dealing with current examples, hypothesising of possible outcomes for instance. Although, not knowing if the actions prove effective does limit the potential in such studies. Nevertheless, through the framing of the research questions and the general research problems, I have attempted to avoid the instrumental approach whatsoever.

Regarding any further delimitations, few make sense to follow rigorously. The focus remained on recent nonviolent actions, yet they are results of, and thereby linked to, older nonviolent actions. Of course, these were not comparably dealt with, but ignoring them completely limits the general understanding. Likewise, most nonviolent action is happening in and around Juba, the capital. There are, as

we will see however, important aspects involving nonviolent action in rural communities. These were therefore included, although to a much smaller degree.

3.3 In-depth interviews

In aiming to deepen insights into how nonviolent action can be understood from the South Sudanese context, in-depth data from South Sudanese sources working with these issues were required. This data is essentially only acquired through first-hand interviews (Willis, 2006: 146). As high-quality empirical data was required for tackling the research problems, I opted for in-depth interviews.

When conducting qualitative peace research, it is advisable to select interviewees with a purpose. Bronéus (2011: 134-135) argues good interview subjects should be credible, experienced and knowledgeable. I contacted a Swedish non-governmental organization working with nonviolent action that had partners in South Sudan, and they referred me to John Moses at the Organization for Nonviolence and Development. Moses then helped me arrange interviews with himself, as well as two of his colleagues (for a discussion of them working for the same organization, see 3.4). In the meantime, I was also in touch with another local civil society organization working with nonviolence in South Sudan. They also referred me to John and his team, saying “they will be absolutely the best to interview for your thesis”. The selection thus became a priority of quality over quantity.

While I had initially hoped for a larger number of interviews, time issues made me satisfy with the three. Moreover, Alvesson & Sköldberg (2018: 349) highlights the discursive value in a single discussion, which can be insightful to the general opinions in a certain sector. Even a few interviews “if carefully interpreted, can give a great deal if it is combined with other qualified data” (ibid).

Due to the ongoing pandemic the interviews had to be conducted online, via Zoom and WhatsApp. Whereas there remain perceptions of virtual meetings not being able to replace certain aspects of face-to-face interviews (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Green & Thorogood, 2018), some authors have argued the quality

of data collected through online video communication platforms such as Zoom or Skype have been just as high (see eg. Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). The main challenges when communicating through Zoom with contacts in low-income countries, such as South Sudan, is the lack of a stable internet connection (Reñosa et al., 2020: 2). We were, of course, aware of this and had WhatsApp as a potential back-up if the internet connection were to cut off. Whereas the internet did cut off sporadically, the interviewees would then repeat themselves so that no substantial information was lost. Having the interviews online also provided a safe place for the interviewees. Being able to talk at their work enabled them to open up and speak freely about practices not appreciated by everyone.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature as this ensures coverage of the central topics, whilst allowing for some flexibility. This method also opens the potential of discovering new perspectives and not limiting the interviews to the preconceptions of the researcher (Willis, 2006: 144-146). The interview questions were framed to reach both holistic overviews of the nonviolent movement in South Sudan, and more detailed accounts of individual nonviolent actions. They remained rather open, allowing for a “reflective listening”-method. Through empathizing with the interviewees, nodding and “hmm-ing” along, this method increases the quality and quantity of the dialogue (Bronéus, 2011: 137). In combination with the semi-structured method and the wide interview questions, I was able to ask insightful follow-up questions and thereby reach deeper understandings.

As part of ethical considerations, I explicitly stressed that if the interviewees had more pressing work, they should focus on that. They were told only to assist me should they have the time, possibility and desire to do so. Before the interviews I asked whether they wanted to remain anonymous and if there was anything they did not want to cover. I have also tried to exclude any potentially controversial data. This was done through comparing my research with a similar report (John et al., 2018), that will be covered in 3.4 below.

3.4 Material

The main bulk of material for the analysis consist of the three first-hand interviews I conducted in May 2021. Initially I was sceptical of mainly using sources that could be directly linked to the same organization, ONAD. Although, this might not have been as problematic as it may appear. ONAD has been promoting nonviolent action before South Sudanese independence, reaching back as far as the 1990s. While difficult to confirm, two of the interviewees mentioned that ONAD was the first civil society organization working with nonviolent action in South Sudan. Regardless, they have since then been responsible for nonviolent training throughout the country. In fact, their training laid the foundation for the new nonviolent action movement called New Tribe. People from all over the country participated in ONAD's nonviolent training. Learning about strategic nonviolent methods and the underlying philosophy, they returned to their home communities to pass on the information. Later, they reconnected through their organizations into the New Tribe, now consisting of over 50 civil society organizations all working for nonviolence (John; Deng). Furthermore, whereas they currently work for the same organization, all interviewees had substantial experience both from other organizations and the wider nonviolent movement in South Sudan. As such, the data and subsequent interpretation of which, whilst coming from one organization, has also branched out and is arguably representative for most of the nonviolent work in South Sudan. This would probably be what I would have found out if I had the time to conduct briefing interviews.

As mentioned in 3.3, even a small number of interviews, if carefully interpreted, can yield valuable understandings when combined with qualified secondary data. While providing insightful first-hand data, the interviews could benefit from secondary material for contextualization (Brounéus, 2011: 132), especially considering the low number of interviewees. Therefore, I incorporated a comprehensive report by John et al. (2018), to broaden the analysis. This also allowed me to verify if the perceptions of the interviewees matched the wider nonviolence movement in South Sudan.

John et al. (2018) offers a nuanced and detailed overview of nonviolent action in South Sudan, in which its relationship with peacebuilding is stressed. Building on numerous interviews with civil society actors involved with nonviolent action and peacebuilding in South Sudan, the report paints a picture of a widespread and strategic nonviolent action movement within the war-torn country. Despite a restricted civil society and an ongoing civil conflict, nonviolent action remains prevalent. Numerous grave challenges do remain for nonviolent action, including a general lack of knowledge of nonviolence, fear of crack-down on activists and economic and social disparity.

4 Background

4.1 Conflict in the world's newest country

Freed from the Anglo-Egyptian condominium in 1956, southern Sudan's post-colonial existence have been ravaged by civil conflict. As the southern region in Sudan, it fought two civil wars (1955-1972 and 1983-2005) with the government in the north. The second civil war was fought between the government in Khartoum and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLA/M). The fighting ultimately ended with the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (UDCP, n.d.b). Importantly, paragraph 1.3 of the CPA stipulated South Sudan's self-determination, the nature of which was to be decided through a referendum scheduled for 2011. However, the agreement was internationally imposed to a large degree. The international mediators favoured a narrow inclusion of actors for the sake of reaching results and ending the north-south conflict. Other regions were neglected a seat in the negotiations, thereby solidifying NCP's (the National Congress Party, based in the Khartoum) and SPLA/M's legitimacy and hegemony, neither of whom were committed to actual democratization (Somerville, 2017: 292).

The reign of SPLA/M was heavily military focused, and civilian matters were largely neglected. The transition into the world's newest independent state has not had the wanting effect either. SPLM in-fighting led to President Salva Kiir sacking Vice-President Riek Machar, who took charge of SPLM In Opposition (SPLM-IO). This, in turn, led to the civil war that has been detrimental to the country since (ibid: 293-295). Several peace agreements have been made since, yet none has managed to effectively bring peace to the country (Reuters, 2021). The current humanitarian situation is beyond grim: more than 6 million are facing crisis-level food insecurity; over 4 million are displaced (both domestically and

internationally); and by 2021 some 8.3 million people are estimated to be in dire need of humanitarian aid (World Bank, 2021). Whereas the conflict quieted down the last few years, there are several worrying trends. According to a recent UN report, military, ethnic and political divisions are widening in South Sudan. The conflict that already has cost over 400,000 lives, risk a large-scale resurgence (Al Jazeera, 2021).

4.2 Nonviolent action in South Sudan

Nonviolent action is not a strange phenomenon to South Sudan. Even before independence, nonviolent campaigns took place under a unified Sudan. The October Revolution of 1964 and the uprising of April 1985 remain as the two main historical examples. Through non-cooperation and strikes did the resistance movement brings down two dictators (John et al., 2018: 5), already showcasing the potential of nonviolent movements. In the pursuit of South Sudanese independence nonviolent actions played a key role. In 2009, thousands of civilians participated in a demonstration calling for the peaceful transition to democracy, in addition to the implementation of the CPA. A few days after, policies pursuant to article 1.3 of the CPA (the referendum) was passed by the Sudanese parliament (Aleu, 2010). Whereas nonviolent action helped the independence movement, the South Sudanese government have integrated former rebel groups. This is argued to legitimize the violence that now has taken the form of yet another civil war (John et al., 2018: 6).

Since independence, and the civil war, nonviolent action has persisted. Much of this action has been in the form of protests and persuasions, as opposed to interventions or non-cooperation who generally require more cohesive organization (Lambo, 2020). However, numerous challenges still face South Sudanese nonviolent activists. The situation of the country, with a civil war, crumbled state and restricted civil society does not help.

5 Analysis

5.1 Interpreting the case through Vinthagen's theory

Normative regulation

The protracted conflict in South Sudan has arguably normalized violence within the country. Ravaging the country for decades, many youths – in a country with a median age of 18,6 (CIA, 2021) – have not experienced a state of peace. In itself, this is not enough to socially legitimize the violence, as seen by the mass demonstrations and general peacebuilding work – both nonviolent and not. Unsurprisingly, there still exists a widespread dissatisfaction with the ongoing conflict. For instance, there is a major nonviolent campaign called Anataban (“I am tired” in Arabic), which targets young South Sudanese who have not yet experience a peaceful South Sudan but who are fed up with the violence (John et al., 2018: 9-10).

Despite this, however, many struggle with imagining an alternative. Luka Deng recounted a time when he spoke about nonviolent action where a South Sudanese man answered: “nonviolence? This country was liberated (through violent means), so now you are saying solving things in a peaceful manner is useful?” Even many South Sudanese activists lack deeper understandings of the potential power of nonviolent action. As such, a central aspect of much nonviolent work the interviewees had done was in raising awareness. Delicately put, “the key is training and awareness raising, so that people should have the conscience that nonviolence is the right thing to do” (John). Of this there are several recent examples. For instance, the Anataban campaign's central method is raising

awareness and calling for nonviolent methods for addressing the root causes of the civil war (John et al., 2018: 9).

Training, the other essential aspect, continues to be one of the main methods of nonviolent action within the country. As touched upon in 5.1, ONAD has been one of, if not the, key actor for nonviolence training in South Sudan. People from all over the country, with all sorts of backgrounds (civil society activist, religious workers, students, etc.) have attended ONAD's courses and lectures. The courses educate activists about general methodology, in other words, strategies and back-ups, potential allies or hindrances, risk management etc. They are then supposed to pass this information on to their respective communities. That way, nonviolent training reaches more people. This occurs even at the level of children. Peace Clubs, with the ambition of educating school children about nonviolence, and its potential in solving their issues, have been established mainly around the Juba area. However, notwithstanding the relatively long history of nonviolent training in South Sudan, it has yet to reach out to many people. Flora Lukudu recounts lessons from several protests, during which some of the participants had no understanding of the background of the protests, or what nonviolence entailed.

When asking John about what the theoretical material mainly consist of, the main bulk of material comes from literature, including the writings of Gene Sharp, but also religious sources such as the Bible and the Coran. As John et al. (2018: 13) argues, most sources thus emanate from North America and Europe, in which the political and social conditions are completely different. Applying this information untactfully to the South Sudanese context can be problematic. John underscored the contextual aspects that need to be put into consideration when choosing what nonviolent method to use. As part of a larger nonviolent campaign targeting financial accountability and transparency, organized by numerous civil society organization and youth rights' organizations, John put up a billboard. On the billboard it said "Gurush Wen", which is Juba Arabic for "where is the money" (see Abale, 2020 for the story). Opting for a billboard over a march was due to the South Sudan context, in which, according to John: "it speaks louder". This is knowledge not obtainable from theoretical training but from practical experience, the importance of which all interviewees stressed.

The overarching goal of all this work is comparable to the constructive aspect of normative regulation. Peace was maintained as a central goal throughout the

interviews, thereby linking nonviolence to peacebuilding. John et al. (2018) recaches similar findings in that stopping the violence is “prioritize[d] ahead of other social, political, or economic advances” (John et al., 2018: 6). This view was nuanced in my interviews. Instead, a more appropriate take would be that peace is understood as a prerequisite for a democratic and equal society, in which nonviolence would be practiced. That ideal society is the actual goal, and “nonviolence is only way to get there” (Deng).

In accordance with constructive normative regulation, this involves building alternative social and nonviolent institutions. Amongst other, this was manifested when ONAD shed light on environmental pollution being a potential threat in the oil-rich regions. This spotlight eventually made several other CSOs interested. They then jointly formed the Civil Society Coalition on Natural Resources, which now spearheads the campaign for a safe environment in the oil-rich regions.

Finally, the nonviolence movement in South Sudan is growing. More and more civil society actors are incorporating nonviolence in their repertoires. For instance, “[w]e have also seen churches taken up nonviolence as a key peacebuilding practice [...] the culture of nonviolence is, in my view, on continuous rise. People are beginning to think that nonviolence is an ideal approach to manage conflicts” (John).

Dialogue facilitation

For the notion of a nonviolent society to spread, dialogue facilitation is required. From my material I was able to discern both resistant and constructive dialogue facilitation happening in South Sudan. All interviewees admitted that nonviolent action had not reached the substantial goals they might have hoped for. Nevertheless, they were aware that this process of nonviolent action takes time. Therefore, much focus of their work revolved around getting their voices heard. Even though protesters get arrested or silenced, they might get their message across. This is especially crucial in the South Sudanese context, as nonviolent action remains largely unnoticed in the general discourse. Yet this is starting to change. “People consider news only when they involve some degree of violence,

but now people are beginning to consider news where nonviolent actions are used” (John).

While the South Sudanese state has been on the brink of collapsing since its inception, it still manages to uphold a dominant societal discourse. After much experience with the interaction between protesters and the police, the interviewees have learned that the police are fed with propaganda. Protesters taking to the streets are painted as “criminal, anti-government or (wanting) regime change, so the activist are being labelled in a more negative way to make them vulnerable for intimidation and arrest” (John). Accordingly, nonviolent activists in South Sudan pursue counter-propaganda measures. This is done both in the interaction with the police (to which we will come back to in the discussion of utopian enactment) and elsewhere. It not uncommon for nonviolent activists to use social media, newspapers or the local radio to promote upcoming campaigns and actions. Lukudu mentions how this often is done collectively, through many people speaking up about the same issue. That way, their voice is unified and can more easily challenge the dominant discourse. A clearer picture of the Janus-faced nature of resistant and constructive dialogue facilitation is hard to find.

Constructive dialogue facilitation is conducted on several levels. Several nonviolent campaigns and actions have been carried out to include the voices at the grass-root level. However, most of these voices are from the urban areas. Reaching the rural communities remains challenging and costly, according to the interviewees. Most dialogue facilitation happened within the movement, between various civil society actors. Coalitions such as The New Tribe was formed out the need to facilitate intertribal dialogue (John et al., 2018: 10). The nonviolent movement also works together with human rights defenders to strengthen their network. South Sudanese human rights defenders are also vital in exposing and documenting human rights abuses by the repressors (John et al., 2018), helping to clean up the dominant discourse. The nonviolent movement is as Lukudu profoundly puts it “the voice of the voiceless.”

Lastly, dialogue facilitation is also aimed at including the government and the top-level public sector. All interviewees told of nonviolent actions that had involved some form of open dialogue with the government, and they had continuously tried to include the government in various actions. This often took the form of a petition of demands being handed over to the parliament, or other

powerful authorities. The interviewees argue results have come because of this and other civil society organization's work, although this, of course, is difficult to verify.

Utopian enactment

Trying to include the government in the dialogue is not just a rationale in itself. It is also part of a utopian process of friendship and equality. None of the interviewees framed the government or the police as the enemy. Instead, they saw them as South Sudanese equals. Some of the police "are more like our allies, because we are fighting for a common good, some of them lack basic services, education or health services, and actually have not yet received their salaries for several months", John briefs me. Being able to see the humanity despite the other sides' violence is utopian enactment in a nutshell.

This enactment also has a strategic side. When protesters are arrested, it exposes the brutality of the oppressors. Simultaneously, the cause of the activist is dispersed further. For many, this is how they initially become aware of nonviolent action. As touched upon when discussing dialogue facilitation, when a police officer arrests a nonviolent activist, it also creates a lucrative interaction. During these moments, activists have the chance to inform the police officer about their real purpose, as opposed to the propaganda. All sides suffer from the status quo, and they therefore share an overarching goal. Whereas this may sound naive, both Lukudu and John told stories of these interactions resulting in the police officer understanding and sympathizing with the activist. Likewise, during similar interactions with governmental officials, the same utopian approach was taken, and to positive results as well. Of course, this method may not have resulted in any major concrete consequences, but it is nevertheless a necessary part of utopian enactment. It breaks up solid identities, and challenges rigid dichotomies. In a very Gandhi-esque manner, the goal is not to defeat the enemy, but to win together with them.

Finally, as part of the utopian ideals of friendship and equality, there is a need to include rural communities as well. Broad inclusion is a cornerstone of

nonviolent action and peacebuilding, because “if we don’t have anyone aboard, you have not achieved peace” (Lukudu). This rationale is further reflected in several other nonviolent movements as well (John et al., 2018).

Power breaking

The power relations of subordination are strong in the country. “Although South Sudan’s constitution recognizes the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of association, protesters have often been assaulted, injured, or killed by government security forces” (John et al., 2018: 11). Whereas this is not unique to South Sudan, the situation there is particularly grim. Many people fear taking to the streets and protest. Lukudu mentions that even some of those committed to nonviolence, when it is time for practical action, drop out due to safety concerns.

Breaking out of these power relations is thus of paramount interest for the nonviolence movement. A traditional approach to this would include civilian protection. Some organizations, like the international Nonviolent Peace Force, operate using this method in South Sudan (John et al., 2018: 12). However, for most civil society organizations in the country this remains challenging. Deng maintains that the authorities that should provide this safety fail in their job to do so. The main contributions of organizations such as ONAD is to continue raising awareness and standing in solidarity with protesters. Additionally, stressed throughout all the interviews is the inherent unity within the nonviolent movement. When an activist is arrested, for instance, networks of civil society organizations mobilise to get an overview of the situation. Once the activist is located, they will put pressure on the relevant authorities and try to get them released. In this way, a sort of collective empowerment is realised.

Whilst not equally common, there are sporadic non-cooperation actions taking place in South Sudan (John et al., 2018: 7). There are cases of people in certain ethnic group refusing to marry others from a different tribe as a nonviolent action. ONAD participated in a project where people voluntarily turned themselves in to fill up the prisons. In doing this, the participants showed how they were not subdued by the repression. “It’s a kind of nonviolence, to somehow undermine the

tactics used against protesters” (John). This is another manifestation of nonviolent work aimed at weakening power relations of subordination.

5.2 Interpreting Vinthagen’s theory through the case

Vinthagen’s theoretical framework thus far paints a holistic, yet detailed picture of nonviolent action in the South Sudanese context. However, certain aspects are left out, or cannot be explained sufficiently. In general, challenges have an awkward position in Vinthagen’s theory. The inherent contradictions within the theoretical framework are presented as the main challenges nonviolent action face. External factors (by which I mean outside the theory, or empirical threats), such as when John had to use billboard instead of marching the streets, are counted as background material. It is the context in which nonviolent action is applied, but should nonviolent actions not adapt to the specific context?

Vinthagen’s theory is built on a rather flexible understanding of nonviolence. As discussed in 2.2, nonviolent action is complex and ambivalent. It functions as a combination of different rationales, some more or less discernible. Therefore, empirically it will change its methods and rationales depending on context. Yet the contextual conditions are mainly depicted as hindrances, not goals to be dealt with. Nonviolence, in Vinthagen’s view, needs to aim at establishing an ideal utopian society for it to truly function. Admittedly, this goal can temporarily be worked around. But what is the timing for that? How does one know how long some of the action types can be replaced? And what happens if the timer runs out, is the opportunity forever lost?

For instance, as mentioned in 5.1, certain people joined nonviolent actions without the knowledge of what nonviolence entails. These kinds of interactions, while not purely nonviolent, are still part of the action, or at least the reality in which nonviolent action is conducted. Arguably, looking too far ahead, without focusing on the current issues at hand, will limit the possibility for nonviolent action to function.

The financial aspect is also neglected in Vinthagen's theory. Nonviolent action undoubtedly cost money, especially the constructive aspects of building up a nonviolent society through training and information spreading. All interviewees mentioned this as one of the main issues for reaching the rural areas of South Sudan. Even if the ideal form of nonviolence would be achievable in theory in South Sudan and all the action type were perfectly combined, it still would not achieve anything if there were no resources. Of course, this is an exaggerated example, but it still points toward the impact financial means can have, and that it should be a part of the theory because it affects nonviolent action in practice. This is of special importance in a context such as the South Sudanese, where the protracted conflict has plunged the country into economic despair (John et al., 2018: 14).

Finally, Vinthagen's theory also struggles with international aspects. Lukudu recalled her getting major nonviolent training from United States Institute of Peace. Deng also conducted much nonviolent work abroad, both for issues related to South Sudan and not. These types of methods do not fit well into any of the action types, yet they undoubtedly are nonviolent action. Likewise, diasporas have largely untapped potentials in nonviolent action. With over four million South Sudanese displaced within and outside the country, this is especially relevant for this case. In 2018 the South Sudan Women Coalition for Peace and Development held a virtual summit, aimed at raising international awareness, for amongst other the South Sudanese diaspora (John et al., 2018: 8).

I do not want to delve into this too much as the concern is with nonviolence in South Sudan, but then this is also the point. Separating individual empirical cases neglects the international aspects which is part of many nonviolent actions. This is arguably a general fault within nonviolent studies (this one included). Whereas not expressed to be limited to nonviolent actions within a single country, Vintage's theory does appear to be suited to that purpose. However, it remains to be seen whether it can be applied to international contexts.

5.3 Refining the case and Vinthagen's theory

When speaking about the report (John et al., 2018), Moses reiterated the finding that the main forms of nonviolent action used in South Sudan was limited to protests and persuasions. He continued by arguing that if the same research would be conducted in a year or two, there will be several new cases to document. I would argue, this is already the case.

Yes, the main methods remain to a certain extent protests and persuasions. Nevertheless, I would argue a wider diversification of methods can still be discerned. When adopting Vinthagen's theory, light is shined upon alternative methods. Perhaps more so than others, nonviolent training is prevalent in much of South Sudan. Admittedly, though, training functions more as forming a foundation from which nonviolent action methods can be adopted. Nevertheless, nonviolent training is part of a constructive normative regulation. This also happens to be the aspect under which most nonviolent action analysed from my data fall under. In the same way, there appear to be a prioritization on the constructive part of all the action types. Again, this circles back to the lack of more resistant methods of non-cooperation or direct intervention. Although, observing a trend of diversification since John et al. (2018), this will most likely increase in the future. Of course, if the civil war resurges, it will have huge implications for the future of nonviolent actions in South Sudan.

There are several aspects highlighted through nonviolent action in the South Sudanese context that Vinthagen's theory insufficiently incorporates. Many of the challenges facing nonviolent action in South Sudan, remain secondary within the theoretical framework. Likewise, certain aspects, such as financial means and international work do not fit anywhere, despite their apparent relevance.

Taking these deviations from Vinthagen's theory into account, it begs the question of this is because of the South Sudanese context, gaps in the theoretical framework or perhaps both. The overview of nonviolent action in South Sudan, as seen through Vinthagen's framework is ambivalent. On the one hand, it does paint a not so holistic image of the dominant type of nonviolent action within the country. Yet, by way of the gaps in Vinthagen's theory, this also means that several promising nonviolent work might not receive the spotlight they deserve.

Although, the opposite could also be argued, as for instance, the economic and political situation exacerbates several key challenges.

On the other, a diversity of nonviolent methods is still discernible. This was somewhat surprising, considering the picture painted in John et al. (2018). I believe Vinthagen's theoretical framework help spotlight a larger variety of methods, several of which would not be considered nonviolent work. Paradoxically, nonviolent work in South Sudan have also shed light on several nonviolent actions that Vinthagen's have yet to consider. Together, they produce a holistic interpretation of nonviolent action in South Sudan.

Ultimately, nonviolent action in South Sudan tends to lean towards a constructive nonviolence, mainly focusing on protests, persuasion, dialogue and training. A diversification can be delineated, yet serious challenges still stand in the way of this progress. There are several gaps from Vinthagen's theory, and this could arguably be one of the reasons behind the lack of significant consequences of the nonviolent work. Although, I would maintain that substantial progress has been made in the nonviolent movement in South Sudan. It has indeed not been an easy task, especially considering the hostile context. But having grown from, possibly, a single organization to country-wide movements, in which grassroots and government official cooperate through an arrange of methods is admirable. The future of nonviolent action in South Sudan might therefore still be promising, albeit with a civil war hanging over it.

6 Conclusion

Through interviewing central actors within the nonviolent movement in South Sudan – and then interpreting and analysing them through a reflexive approach and an abductive method – a comprehensive overview emerges. Applying Vinthagen’s theoretical framework on this image further nuances it. When reinterpreting the analysis of both the empirical case and the theory, a holistic yet ambivalent understanding is reached. Nonviolent action can thus be understood from the South Sudanese context as predominantly a constructive normative regulation, but also a diversified practice. Yet this is but one perspective on a complex and holistic phenomenon.

This research process – through reflexivity, abduction, Vinthagen and South Sudan – has resulted in a major new take on nonviolent work in South Sudan. From my preconceived ideas as a Western researcher, I have, at least according to myself, reached vastly new understandings. The final picture remains ambivalent and nuanced. Nonviolent action faces many challenges, and in many ways reaches few concrete results. Yet it also holds substantial potential and can be multifaceted, even in the most restrictive contexts.

Lastly, it remains important to maintain that this is my understanding of nonviolence in South Sudan. There are undoubtedly several choices throughout this research that would have changed the final understanding. The least I could have done is highlighting my arguments for those choices, which I think have led to a holistic and nuanced picture of nonviolent action from the South Sudanese context.

7 Appendix

7.1 Semi-structured questionnaire

Accordingly with a semi-structured interview method, the interviews were structured around the following questions:

Personal inquiries:

- Do you mind telling a little bit about yourself, mainly with a focus on your work with nonviolence?
- What type of nonviolent action have you been active in? Any specific methods, organizations, movements and/or campaigns?
- How did you come to learn about those methods? Have you received or conducted any training or education of nonviolent action?
- What does “nonviolent action” mean to you?
- Is there any specific goal you pursue through nonviolent action?

The general situation of nonviolent action in South Sudan:

- How would you describe the situation of civil society in South Sudan today?
- What are the main forms of nonviolent action used in South Sudan? How are they organized? Through any specific organization or network?
- Have there been any progress or results of nonviolent action?
- What would you say are the main challenges for nonviolent action in South Sudan?
- Do you have any idea of how to overcome those challenges? Is nonviolence the only method of doing that?

Note: For the interview with Moses John, I changed some questions as well as slightly shifted the overall focus. This was mainly due to the report he co-wrote (presented in 3.4) providing the bigger picture, and presumably his general understanding. Therefore, I instead aimed at reaching data that would complement the report and help me tackle my research problems.

7.2 List of interview subjects

1. Flora Lukudu, constructive organiser at Organisation for Nonviolence and Development (ONAD), interview date: 2021-05-24.
2. Luka Deng, Nonviolence trainer and Activity Coordinator at ONAD, interview date: 2021-05-25.
3. Moses John, co-founder and executive organiser at ONAD, also nonviolent trainer and researcher, interview date: 2021-05-25.

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