

## ***Kony 2012* and the Political Economy of Conflict Representation**

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**Should advocacy NGOs, no matter how noble their intentions, be forgiven for ignoring or misrepresenting inconvenient facts to more effectively raise revenue for their campaigns?**

### **Introduction**

On Monday, March 5th, American NGO Invisible Children released *Kony 2012*, a short film about the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) commander Joseph Kony, and the war crimes that his organization has committed in both northern Uganda and surrounding countries since the 1980s. In the language of social media, it 'went viral' almost immediately. In lay terms, this means the video was extensively shared over Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, blogs, and other applications - and very, very quickly. Indeed, after only one week, the film has received approximately 73 million views on Youtube, and another 16.5 million on Vimeo, making this initiative one of the most effectively distributed advocacy campaigns of the last decade. Further, some impact monitoring organizations, such as the firm Visible Measures, now claim that this volume of activity makes *Kony 2012* the fastest spreading viral campaign in Internet history (Steel 2012).

Yet, immediately after the video was released, a wide range of expert analysts levelled serious criticisms at both the film and its producers (cf. de Waal 2012; Harding 2012; Schomerus 2012). Among these, a central theme is Invisible Children's decidedly simplistic portrayal of the LRA crisis. Critics point out that the LRA has not operated in Uganda since 2006 (Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2010; International Crisis Group [ICG] 2011) – a fact that is only briefly acknowledged in the video – and that Kony's current freedom perhaps owes more to the region's complex politics than to a lack of personnel, resources, or Western support, as the film implies.

In extracting lessons from the debate surrounding *Kony 2012*, this short paper explores the political economy of representing conflicts and other complex humanitarian emergencies through new media. In doing so, it uses the film as a heuristic from which to problematize the controversial intersection between social media, on-the-ground humanitarian and political realities, and advocacy work on such crises. First, the paper examines the accessible, 'viral' manner in which Invisible Children disseminated *Kony 2012*, before reviewing substantive criticisms of the film, and subsequently discussing the 'political economy of representation' inherent therein.

### **Youth Mobilization and Humanitarian Advocacy**

First, one should note that *Kony 2012* was incredibly successful in reaching out to youthful audiences on a global scale. For many Western youth that have never studied East African history and politics, this film likely provides a gripping introduction to the LRA insurgency and associated human rights

abuses. Indeed, one could argue that *Invisible Children* has mastered a skill-set that eludes many academics, educators, and advocacy professionals – that is, the effective production of a humanitarian narrative that even most children can understand.

Further, by rendering the subject material accessible, *Invisible Children* also ensured that its campaign was experienced as a form of empowerment for those who chose to participate in it. No longer reserved for ‘experts’, no matter how broadly defined, newly recruited activists were suddenly led to believe that they too could actively influence humanitarian affairs. To achieve this, the film utilizes a narrative structure that strongly resonates with young (and particularly American) audiences – one of popular, democratic influence over politicians and policymakers – whose modern legacy arguably lies in the African-American civil rights movement. Thus, at the click of a ‘share button’ (and the donation of at least US\$ 30) young people suddenly conceived of themselves as co-producers of an exciting campaign, rather than as passive consumers of the type of complex and allegedly unintelligible discourse that academics regularly generate. Here, other NGOs can doubtlessly extract lessons for future advocacy campaigns.

Further, notwithstanding the substantive criticisms that will be reviewed below, the film was also immediately successful at stimulating public debate and discussion about important humanitarian issues. Notably, these include violent conflicts in Central Africa and the moral responsibility of Western publics to advocate for the cessation thereof. Indeed, at the time of writing this piece, *Kony 2012*’s page on Youtube has received approximately 500,000 comments from viewers. Although NGOs and other civil society actors have produced numerous films about northern Uganda and the LRA (this is the eleventh video on the topic from *Invisible Children* alone), none have enjoyed close to the same level of success regarding public engagement. Similarly, a vast array of material has been produced on the topic of ending the ongoing crisis in Darfur, Sudan – including the film *Darfur Now*, which stars Hollywood actors George Clooney and Don Cheadle, amongst others – but these and comparable efforts likewise pale in comparison. Yet, despite these successes, numerous analysts have raised concerns that the film goes well beyond simplification in the interest of public accessibility, and strays into the domain of strategic embellishment or selectivity (cf. Saunders 2012).

### **Substantive Criticisms**

Indeed, critics of *Kony 2012* highlight the narrow distinction between simplification and outright misrepresentation. Although the film does not explicitly state that the LRA still poses a threat to Ugandans, it presents video footage from Gulu, at the peak of the LRA-related internally displaced persons (IDP) crisis in the early 2000s, alongside nonspecific appeals to “help Africans”. Such associations are misleading, given that Kony and the LRA have not held a sustained presence in Uganda for more than half a decade (HRW 2010). As noted by the award-winning Ugandan journalist Angelo Izama (2012):

“To call the campaign a misrepresentation is an understatement. While it draws attention to the fact that Kony, indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court in 2005, is still on the loose, its portrayal of his alleged crimes in Northern Uganda are from a bygone era.”

That said, at its halfway point, the film presents an animation that portrays the LRA’s reach as spreading or growing into the surrounding countries of South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. But again, this is asserted in a manner that directly contradicts expert analyses, which describe the organization’s influence as shrinking or declining as it was driven

out of Uganda by US- and UN-backed troops (ICG 2011; Schomerus *et al.* 2011). Further, only passing mention is made of the various attempts to establish a peace process in the region, however unsuccessful they have been, nor of the complex and varied reasons for such diplomatic failures (Wilkerson 2010; Le Sage 2011).

Accordingly, such omissions reinforce Schomerus *et al.*'s (2011: 3) claim that, along with other advocacy NGOs, Invisible Children has,

“manipulated facts for strategic purposes, exaggerating the scale of LRA abductions and murders and emphasizing the LRA’s use of innocent children as soldiers ... [while] rarely refer[ing] to the Ugandan atrocities or those of Sudan People’s Liberation Army, such as attacks against civilians ... or the complicated regional politics fuelling the conflict.”

Crucially, such concerns were also mirrored by a wide variety of Ugandan activists, researchers, journalists, and civil society professionals in the aftermath of *Kony 2012*’s release. In addition, these commentators bemoaned the recurrence of a familiar narrative – that of middle class, and predominately white-, young Americans ‘saving Africans’ from their own self-imposed miseries (cf. Butagira 2012; Fisher 2012; Pflanz 2012). Given that this film is the eleventh instalment in a series produced by Invisible Children, this narrative has now repeatedly depicted Ugandans as passive victims, and, by extension, has obscured decades of local activism and grassroots campaigning by Ugandans themselves that has sought to offset the damage inflicted by the LRA.

As such, many Ugandans find it difficult to accept *Kony 2012*’s narrative, as they remain all-too-aware both of how much power their own president – Yoweri Museveni - wields over the region’s collective response to the LRA. Further, Ugandans clearly and thoroughly understand the problems that *actually* now afflict the northern regions of their country, such as recurring drought and the unprecedented outbreak of “nodding disease” (Batanda 2012). Conversely, though, it remains unclear whether Invisible Children could simultaneously communicate a narrative that effectively deals with these interrelated complexities, and still retain the ability to raise funds for its activities at the present scale.

### **The Political Economy of Crisis Representation: Who Really Benefits?**

Accordingly, these controversies raise a number of serious issues regarding the political economy of representing conflicts and other humanitarian crises to broader public audiences. To clarify, such advocacy initiatives generally involve three distinct components: i) raising awareness of a cause, ii) raising funds to pursue that cause, and iii) actually pursuing that cause. As with any effort to mobilize people with little or no previous exposure to East/Central African history and politics, a degree of simplification is arguably necessary to achieve this first component. Conversely, the danger of strategic misrepresentation to maximize the returns from the second component, rather than mere simplification, is omnipresent. Indeed, the current debate surrounding Invisible Children’s ethics suggests that the division between simplification and misrepresentation grows increasingly blurry. As such, the question stands: Should advocacy NGOs, no matter how noble their intentions, be forgiven for ignoring or misrepresenting inconvenient facts to more effectively raise revenue for their campaigns?

Indeed, one could argue that Invisible Children’s portrayal of the LRA crisis was designed not primarily to make these issues accessible to a wide audience, but to maximize the amount of revenue that would accrue to the agency itself. To achieve this, it was necessary to construe the problem of violent conflict in Central Africa as not just “technically solvable” (*à la* Li 2007), but also solvable to

some extent by Invisible Children. In the film, we are told that the LRA's defeat will put an end to violence in Central Africa, and that Invisible Children can bring this about. By implication, this simple, Manichean narrative – designed to appeal to the largest possible number of people – simultaneously obscures the structural roots of conflicts in the region. Amongst other variables, these include land disputes, ethnic tensions, economic inequality, historical injustices, and exploitative trade relations (Allen 2006; Allen and Vlassenroot 2010). Even more problematically, as was simultaneously noted by Mark Kersten (2012) and Michael Wilkerson (2012), Invisible Children does not explain how the demobilization of Kony and the LRA will prevent similar conflicts from being fuelled by these very same factors. Even at present, the LRA is but one of several rebel groups operating in East/Central Africa, and is arguably no longer the largest nor the most harmful of these (Thurston 2011).

Other questions arise from the relationship between fundraising and *Kony 2012*'s specific prescriptions. Here, the film repeatedly emphasizes that raised funds will enable Invisible Children to uphold its campaign against the removal of US military personnel from Uganda. Yet, US State Department officials have responded that no plans are likely to exist for the extraction of these advisors, and that the US has no intention of abandoning its longstanding strategic interests in Central Africa (Devereaux 2012). Furthermore, the LRA is only one of several reasons for the US military presence in Uganda and neighbouring countries, which notably includes the provision of support for Ugandan troops preparing to fight al-Shabab extremists in Somalia (Butagira 2010). Others have commented on Uganda's recent discovery of oil reserves along its border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, and on the US-backed security operations that will likely be necessary for its extraction (Kathman and Shannon 2011). In light of these omissions, radical analysts have suggested that *Kony 2012*'s primary objective is to raise both support and funds for Invisible Children, as ends in themselves, and that the achievement of post-conflict transformation in Central Africa is of secondary concern to the organization (Fisher 2012; Halpin 2012; Harding 2012; Tharoor 2012).

Indeed, a number of factors could undermine these simplistic prescriptions, but the film conveniently ignores these. Chief among such factors is the ability to actually build political will in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, the Republic of South Sudan, and the Republic of Sudan to fully support an attempt to subdue the LRA. Indeed, for these regimes, Kony arguably remains more useful free and alive than captive or dead (cf. Mwenda 2010). In particular, the LRA's history as a proxy group for the Khartoum government is salient, and is crucial to understanding past failures to capture Kony (cf. Wilkerson 2010).

Further, the International Crisis Group (2006, 2010, 2011) has repeatedly suggested that previous efforts to finally apprehend Kony have failed due to a lack of total commitment from Museveni's regime in Uganda, rather than a lack of manpower, resources, or training, as *Kony 2012* implies. As such, short of bringing about a *Black Hawk Down*-style invasion by US troops, except this time in and through four or five different states, there is little that Invisible Children can do without the support of Museveni (in Uganda), Joseph Kabila (in the DRC), Salva Kiir (in the Republic of South Sudan), and Omar al-Bashir (in the Republic of Sudan). Finally, since President Bashir is also wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of crimes against humanity in Darfur (Rice 2009), it seems unlikely that such cooperation will be garnered through 'awareness raising' alone.

## **Conclusion**

Increasingly, social media and new cinematography technologies present advocacy NGOs with a host of new strategies for raising both 'awareness' and finances. Today, these organizations can distribute a

basic humanitarian message to larger numbers of people in shorter periods of time than ever before, as evidenced by the firm Visible Measure's claim that *Kony 2012* is the fastest spreading viral video of all time (Steel 2012). Further, the inherently democratic nature of social media dissemination offers heartening opportunities to engage young people in humanitarian affairs. Indeed, supporters of both Invisible Children and *Kony 2012* rightfully point out the massive impact that the film has already obtained in introducing otherwise uninterested parties to Central African politics in an engaging manner. Academics, educators, and humanitarian professionals must grapple with these successes, because they highlight the failure of more conventional attempts to reach both youthful constituents and a critical mass of target populations as a whole.

Yet, such wide influence also brings attention to the accountability gap that exists in relation to NGO fundraising based on representations of conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies. Indeed, *Kony 2012*'s prominence has started important discussions about the tension between simplification and misrepresentation in these advocacy campaigns. Such discussions also question the competence of relatively inexperienced civil society groups to design interventions into complex military situations, and to the degree to which these groups should be held accountable for the negative consequences of their prescriptions, if present. These concerns are especially salient in cases where organizations might be tempted to prioritize their own fundraising goals over designing well-conceived objectives, and to insulate themselves from the negative externalities of their own programmes and recommendations.

Moving forward, researchers should continue to monitor the debates surrounding *Kony 2012*, as pertinent arguments and counter-arguments will continue to emerge. Doubtlessly, these discussions will negotiate the tensions between simplification and misrepresentation, between complexity and utility, as well as between simple awareness and holistic understanding. Accordingly, the present topic nicely synergizes with a tradition of scholarship that examines the role of NGOs in "complex emergencies" (cf. Keen 2008), and the controversies inherent therein. Hopefully, though, the contentious debates surrounding both Invisible Children and *Kony 2012* will also inspire more informed engagement with the LRA insurgency and similar crises in East and Central Africa.

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