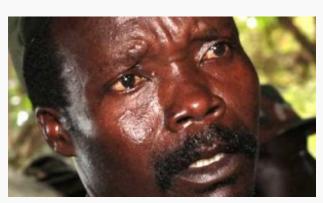# In Defence of the #Kony12 Campaign (guest blog)

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/03/08/in-defence-of-the-kony12-campaign-guest-blog/

Campaign Target: Kony

The **Invisible Children** Kony campaign has succeeded in one important thing. It has sparked a global debate about the best way to mobilise support for human rights action.
With brilliant use of film and online social networks it has created a viral phenomenon that has generated huge publicity for the target of bringing the Ugandan war lord to justice. But critics have accused Invisible Children of advocating **misguided policies**, counter-productive media messaging and **misrepresenting and misunderstanding Africa**. I agree with those criticisms and I have a few of my own that I have **written about here**. But in this guest blog, LSE student and former Invisible Children communications worker Bridgette Bugay responds to the criticism of the campaign.

It might seem as if the backlash has attacked Kony 2012 with the same force that the documentary hit the world with last Monday, March 5th.

In less than three days the 30 minute video has been viewed over 30 million times. Equally remarkable has been the polemic conversation and debate that has developed. Bloggers, academics, and the online intellects have arrived armed with critiques, labels, and magnifying glasses, imploring that we not be swept away, but rather engage with the material critically. Here, I ask these critics to do the same.

Most of the criticisms have focused around largely the same issues, but packaged with slightly different language; each with their own novel devices to describe the fallacies of Invisible Children's latest documentary. Certainly Kony2012 can not be wholly cleared of criticism, but I think it necessary to address some of the more widely circulating commentaries:

(1) it detracts from other human rights issues

(2) It exaggerates and misrepresents the conflict

(3) It perpetuates the "helpless Africa" stereotype.

1. Detracting from other human rights issues

It is this first point I find most perplexing; that is, the accusation that by creating and circulating advocacy media, it in fact *detracts* from the conversation of human rights? As I understand it, the argument suggests that by an increased awareness of one issue, it suppresses the conversation about similar issues (civilian atrocities in Afghanistan and Iraq often being cited); however, I don't see the logic that would lead us to that conclusion.

The reality is while some people dedicate their lives to exposing and ending international human rights violations, most people don't. If nothing else Kony 2012 has done a remarkable job of making human rights a conversation outside of academic ivory towers. It is doing so by rallying around one issue, or person, but it is still provoking conversation in a new audience by speaking to them on their terms.

I'm unwilling to believe that our world consciousness was at full capacity when Kony 2012 broke. Awareness isn't finite. Activism isn't tapped out.

Human right issues shouldn't be about "choosing teams" or "picking sides". It has to begin with a willingness to engage with the general concept of an international community, and Kony 2012 has offered an entry point for *new* people to engage in the discussion.

2. Exaggerating or Misrepresenting the Conflict:

Facts , figures, and research can offer better counter to these critics than I can in this space. I encourage people to research the conflict as it currently exists, (resolve.org, invisiblechildren.com, enough.org, humanrightswatch.org). However, it is important to note that Invisible Children didn't spring up over night blindly choosing a "villain" to make an Internet sensation.

The organization was founded almost a decade ago and although it has made mistakes (most of which they disclose in their last documentary, *Tony*) they have extensive knowledge of the regions, victims and conflict their efforts focus. Ninety-five percent of their staff is local to the regions in which they operate. Further, Invisible Children program coordinators are respected by international state officials, INGOs, and regional actors for their knowledge of the LRA and the conflict. The organization's crisis map (LRACrisistracker.com) sources real-time information from a radio network run by communities in the affected region. This information is not only used by the general public, but by other humanitarians actors focused on the LRA conflict.

All this is evidence that a lot of Invisible Children's energy has gone into promoting an *understanding* of the conflict as it *currently* (literally, in "real-time") exists.

Some have been arguing that the LRA is a "spent force", that this effort is half a decade late, and creating a buzz now is unwarranted. LRA is certainly on the wane, but they still affect the daily lives of thousands in central east Africa (primarily in the CAR, DRC). The conflict has been going for 26 years. Twenty-six. If the LRA is vulnerable, now more than ever, is a time when removal of the force from the region is possible. It is not the time to sit back and assume an obvious end will come about.

3. Stereotype and the Single Story

The last and arguably most problematic issue is the depiction of power/powerless, highlighting race and color:

As one blogger notes, "*…the goal was premised on a White desire to save downtrodden Africa… The movies are premised on the idea that: North American (White) attention will save Africa*"[1].

I do not have the background which grants authority to speak to this, but I would like to offer a humble perspective.

Although at times absolutely necessary, there may be an alternative to the perennial critique which contends that this type of representation necessarily suppresses the subjects' voice, and creates the white man as the hero.

I ask, what if we are in fact moving towards a "global community"?

Idealistic? Perhaps.

Audaciously hopeful? Possibly.

But worth consideration? Absolutely.

To thrust the criticism of,*"**White people only care about White people and the only way to save Black people is**

to get White people to care about them, so to save Black people we need to talk about White people."[2] upon the general public leaves no room for us to consider *relationships* and *humanity* outside the frame of race.

In fact, the unwillingness to consider an alternative does precisely the opposite of what critics mean to do; rather than liberating the subject from "victim", "powerless", etc., it strategically essentializes this genre of documentary creating reductive binaries of black vs. white without consideration of a globalizing context where international empathy, grounded in humanity rather than biological divisions, may in fact be a developing reality.

On a more personal note, I'd like to suggest that it's easy to be skeptical, cynical even, of things that don't look familiar. Invisible Children is a, dare I say, unique humanitarian organization. It has harnessed tools available to this generation of activist, namely technology and social media, to invite people outside of the humanitarian/policy maker world to participate in a conversation about international justice and human rights; and Kony 2012 did this in a big way. It was and is nothing short of shocking. And this shock understandably provokes an initial hesitation to engage with it on its own terms. But once the dust settles, and the critics have exhausted their angles of critique, I wonder if this event will be a seminal moment for human rights advocacy.

This article by LSE student and former Invisible Children worker Bridgette Bugay

*This exclusively my opinion and personal commentary

**for far greater understanding and response please see:

http://www.invisiblechildren.com.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/critiques.html

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[1] http://ericswanderings.wordpress.com/2012/03/06/invisible-children-and-joseph-kony/

[2] http://ericswanderings.wordpress.com/2012/03/06/invisible-children-and-joseph-kony/