

Kony 2012.2: Should We Jump on the #StopKony Bandwagon?

Written by Alexandra Buskie

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ALEXANDRA BUSKIE, APR 9 2012

Hold on to your hat, Hurricane Kony is on its way back! Will Invisible Children's (IC) second video shoot to viral status in as little time as the first? I doubt it: it is not nearly as dramatized and the tone hasn't quite the same urgency, although the last two minutes are quite something. This second video tries to answer some of the critiques laid against the first – this time round the voices of those affected by the violence perpetrated by the Lord's Resistance Army are included, partnerships and collaborative projects on the ground are highlighted, and the importance of international support to local initiatives is stressed. In all, this video shows that the IC can do things differently. There is more meat in this video, but they have succeeded in delivering much the same message. The question is; why did they need two attempts to get it right?

Just three weeks ago, the internet was buzzing about the campaign's first slick video, whether it be encouragement (see Kristof) or, more frequently, critique (see blog posts by AlexdeWaal, RosabellKagumire, TMSRuge, or this piece in *The Atlantic*). The campaign's roaring success to "make Kony famous" had celebrities jostling for pole position in the "who tweets more, cares more" competition, and kids were hankering for the arrival of their Action Kits. As the online babble started to die down, I began to wonder about the nature and utility of advocacy today, the means by which advocacy groups attract our attention, and how they encourage us to act upon our perceived responsibilities towards others.

The first video presented the essence of my problem with international advocacy. Out of all the considerations advanced by those interested in engaging in the prevention of crimes against humanity abroad, the key question generally boils down to one of action: what can I do to make a real change? IC's answer is presented as the panacea to all of Northern Uganda's woes: in order to stop Kony from continuing to ravage central Africa, we have to make him a household name. IC encourages us to buy an action kit, put up posters and don a bracelet in order to raise public awareness. In order to break the public's usual apathy towards protecting the rights of vulnerable populations, IC wilfully capitalised on the overwrought emotions of impressionable teenagers by presenting Ugandans as helpless children waiting to be saved.

There were many criticisms of the first film, but for me, the most important was that at its core, the video was based on two dubious arguments: firstly, that Northern Uganda was still a war-torn region where children still commuted nightly to Gulu for protection from abduction as child soldiers; and secondly, that there was an urgent need for people's support, as otherwise, the US was going to pull its 100 special ops advisors from Uganda and abandon their search for the dregs of the LRA. While the troops will move from Uganda to other parts of the region, there is nothing to suggest that they will leave entirely, and since the LRA moves around, it's probably better that the special ops advisors do to.

These fallacies suggest that rather than really educating the youth with the goal of raising awareness, IC was raising awareness without bothering to properly educate those interested, in order to persuade them to donate money, participate in lobbying efforts and get their own name out in public. What is startlingly clear from this example is that advocacy is an industry like any other. In consumer societies where meaning, morality and good causes have become commodities, IC only supplied what was asked of them – a quick fix for our desire to help others and do

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good. Share this video, put up these posters, and you, my friend, will save the world.

What is disappointing is that IC needed all of this pointed out to them by angry activists, commentators and bloggers. The idea to include the voices of those affected the LRA, and to present the problem of LRA violence in a way that keeps up with emerging contexts and current events (i.e. not sticking to old tactics like using the story of night commuters who no longer exist in an area that has been at peace since at least 2007) is not a new. Rebecca Hamilton discusses in her excellent chronicle of the development and impact of the Darfur Movement, *Fighting for Darfur: Public Action and the Struggle to Stop Genocide* (Palgrave MacMillan: 2011), that one of the best ways to ensure the relevancy of an advocacy campaign to the situation on the ground is to collaborate with partners in the countries affected. These people are best situated to help guide advocacy campaigns and calls to action. And such partnerships also help ensure that the advocacy group's leaders remain accountable to the people they are claiming to act in behalf of.

Kony 2012 "take two" attempts to rectify the first video's mistakes. However, by now, I suspect that people have moved on to the next fad, and I doubt that this video can reach the same popularity of its older brother. I welcome IC's attempt at finally educating people and showing that they do understand who it is they are accountable to. But I still can't see how their suggested means of helping out will make any difference to Kony's impunity. The campaign's short term goals and expectations are mismatched with the long term and sustained efforts that are needed to affect progress on the ground. No-one can foretell whether or not capturing Kony will really stop the violence perpetrated by the members of the LRA, and it is uncertain how much control he actually has over units on the ground. Will posterizing Kony's face across North America make any difference to the people who have been, or could be, affected by the LRA? "Covering the night" seems to me like an action that will only give the illusion of progress.

And so, in light of this, what concrete ways can people have an impact? There are endless ways to get involved in a critical and useful way, the following are examples of ways forward if you have been stirred to action (my thanks go to SienaAnstis for bringing these some of these excellent organisations to my attention) –

WomenofKirekais a local community-owned business supporting women from the Acholi Tribe from Northern Uganda who have been affected by LRA violence.

BOSCOUganda brings internet and Information Technology to areas surrounding Gulu, a city in Northern Uganda.

HopeNorthUganda works with former child soldiers, abductees and those affected by the LRA. There is also a beautiful video describing what they do.

On this side of the pond, you could also join the military, or work with organisations looking to change the overall foreign policy of the government towards countries where mass atrocity crimes take place, like the Will to Intervene Project in Canada, Aegis Trust in the UK or the multitude of other organisations listed on the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect's website.

Alexandra Buskie is a Commissioning Editor at e-IR. Read more from the e-IR editors' blog here.

About the author:

Alex Buskie has an MA in Politics and French from the University of Glasgow. She currently works at the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, in Montreal, Canada, where she coordinates a project providing early warning of genocide and mass atrocity crimes, and researches on the Responsibility to Protect and genocide

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prevention policies. She will be returning to the UK to undertake a Masters in International Relations in September 2012. She has been a Commissioning Editor at e-IR since September 2011.