

Who really benefits from celebrity activism?

Ahead of the 30th anniversary of Geldof and Bono's Live Aid, whether star backers cause damage by oversimplifying the politics of power

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From George Clooney's Enough Project, rapper Akon's newly launched Lighting Africa to the viral Kony 2012 campaign, there's no doubt celebrity activism has gone mainstream.

Mother Jones recently published an ironic map of the African countries celebrities have "claimed" through their charity work: Richard Branson, Oprah and Will Smith have South Africa, while Botswana is Kim Kardashian's.

But this kind of celebrity advocacy isn't new, either. At the turn of the 20th century, the prominent British journalist, author and politician Edmund Dene Morel and Anglo-Irish diplomat Roger Casement successfully challenged King Leopold of Belgium's violent and autocratic rule of the Congo Free State. They did so with the help of notable friends: writers Arthur Conan Doyle and Joseph Conrad, and chocolate magnate William Cadbury.

Between the 1930s and 1950s, suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst fought for a fascist-free, and later independent, Ethiopia, and a few decades later Bob Geldof and Band Aid raised £30m for the victims of the country's famine.

The latest generation of American celebrity activists has most commonly knocked at the doors of western governments, demanding changes in policy towards their chosen cause célèbre. But what are the consequences, and is this something we necessarily want to promote?

Just causes vs personal brands

Should we question the motives of celebrities who hire expensive PR experts to "sell" their convictions? As Daniel Drezner writes in "When foreign policy goes glam", engaging in humanitarian causes clearly benefits the Clooneys, Jolies and Damons of the world. It provides them with access to new outlets - political talk shows or international forums - and helps polish their personal brands.

Causes are to celebrities what corporate social responsibility is to business - every established name has to have at least one.

And while celebrities undoubtedly help bring serious issues to a larger audience - often encouraging pledges from governments, policymakers and businesses - the problem lies in that they are much less effective at transforming all this into appropriate, tangible policies.

Academic Darrel West suggests that the fascination for celebrities raises the risk that "there will be more superficiality and less substance in our political process".

A stark example of this is provided in the new documentary, *We Will Win Peace*, which tracks the impact of Section 1502 of the US's Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act.

Introduced in 2010 and championed by celebrities from Ben Affleck to Nicole Richie, the ruling required companies to disclose their use of conflict minerals originating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or an adjoining country.

It was presented by the Enough Project as an essential precursor to preventing conflict and sexual violence in the DRC. But the new documentary, alongside other pieces of research, shows the very real and devastating effect of this simplified rendering of the facts.

With de facto international boycotts on minerals from the DRC, and a government ban on artisanal mining, tens of thousands of miners and businesses ended up unable to make a living. This pushed many individuals either towards the illicit mining industry or a rebel group, paradoxically exacerbating the very violence it set out to reduce.

So what went wrong? In an article for the World Peace Foundation, writer Alex de Waal says there are fundamental pillars of activism which should always be followed, most of all, the act of responding to and collaborating with local people, rather than imposing outside agendas.

The Dodd-Frank campaign should have involved asking local activists, populations and mining experts in the eastern DRC about mineral supply chains, he writes, to check whether they could be altered to improve the situation.

De Waal also argues that activism should speak to power, but also stand firmly against it, and should not presume that all change is possible from within.

A simple, catch all, solution?

As recent research has shown, the problem with celebrity causes is that they tend to de-politicise activism. They too often obscure the complex dynamics of power and socioeconomic relations in favour of a simple, catch all, solution.

Celebrities speaking truth to power, rather than half-truths that may inadvertently serve the interests of power, may be a more promising way forward if celebrity advocacy is to lead to meaningful socioeconomic change.

The advocacy circuit for change in Africa lacks celebrity participation in bottom-up movements, as opposed to top-down campaigns..

Yet if the cycle of simplified celebrity messages leading to ineffective - even harmful - African policy is to be broken, genuine engagement with, and commitment to, the people they advocate on behalf of is critical.

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