Abstract: Invisible Children’s infamous Youtube video, KONY 2012, tells the stories of children whose lives have been turned upside down by a violent warlord, who must be captured by any means necessary. The video presents a story stripped of its historical and political context, and a whitewashed solution to a local Ugandan problem. The activism KONY 2012 inspired proved to be unsustainable, and Invisible Children’s capital, both monetary and political, dried up while Joseph Kony remains at large. KONY 2012 ultimately serves as an example of many of the pitfalls of humanitarian intervention: a lack of context, the imposition of outside solutions, and an inability to maintain interest long enough to see the program through.

(Keywords: KONY 2012, Uganda, Lord’s Resistance Army, Intervention, Acholi)
Overview:

In 2012, the NGO Invisible Children released *KONY 2012*, a Youtube video created to raise awareness of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and its impact on Northern Uganda, and to galvanize the American public to pressure the government to take on a role in the hunt for Joseph Kony. Although it did not explicitly define its agenda as such, the video advocated for actions that more or less amount to a foreign intervention: sending American troops and resources to Central Africa to search for the LRA. Despite its good intentions, Invisible Children’s account of Northern Uganda’s history fails to accurately identify all the actors responsible for violence against the Acholi people, ignores the evolution of tribalism into territorialized politicization and imposes Western conceptions of justice onto a different culture.

These unfortunate errors epitomize the problems inherent in the institution of humanitarian intervention. Intervention here is defined as an operation conducted by one party in another party’s territory with the goal to make some sort of change. These operations typically include the military in some capacity, whether they are actively engaging in warfare or aiming to secure an area. A humanitarian intervention occurs in response to widespread civilian suffering which results from crises ranging from famine to tsunamis to genocide. The goal of a humanitarian intervention is to alleviate the crisis at hand, and to save or improve the lives of the people that crisis has affected. Invisible Children’s mission advocates for the US government to send its own military forces into East and Central Africa as part of the effort to capture Kony; although they work in tandem with Ugandan forces, the US military involvement constitutes interventionist activity nonetheless. Further, the political pressure conjured and applied by *KONY 2012* affected local military resource allocation, ultimately intervening in a sovereign country’s affairs in a less overt manner.
**Historical Background:**

Uganda emerged into independence from British colonial rule in 1962, tasked with national self-governance for the first time in the twentieth century (Laruni, 2015). The two and a half subsequent decades were characterized by ethnic and territorially motivated struggle for political power. Under British rule Uganda’s four regions enjoyed fairly autonomous regional rule, leading the different ethnic groups into territorial alliances, vying for regional political power (Laruni, 2015). As the ability to compete for political influence on a national level shifted to Ugandans, identity-based coalitions formed: the Bantu South and the Nilotic North (Laruni, 2015).

Political leadership vacillated between Northern and Southern politicians until 1986, when Southerner Yoweri Museveni’s armed resistance to Northerner Tito Okello’s reign seized control of Kampala during a period of supposed ceasefire (Oosterom, 2016). Power shifts between North and South during this period were accompanied by a trend of violent retaliation against political opponents of the ruling party. Okello had succeeded Milton Obote, a fellow Northerner, via coup (Laruni, 2015). Despite Obote’s Northern identity, Okello’s ethnic group, the Acholi, felt that Obote favored his own ethnic group and territory, and thus Okello’s army formed to depose Obote (Laruni, 2015). Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) sought to return control of the nation to the South, and have remained in power since Okello’s overthrow.

A number of armed resistance groups formed in Northern Uganda in the aftermath of Museveni’s victory, most notably the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) and the LRA (Van Acker, 2004). Led by Alice Lakwena (née Auma), the HSM fought in opposition to the NRA, winning a number of military victories in the North but eventually facing defeat and ultimately disbanding.
en route to Kampala (Van Acker, 2004). The LRA has many common characteristics with the HSM: both invoke a divine mandate to justify their violence, both are commanded by leaders who claim to be possessed by holy spirits, and both include Acholi liberation in their mission. But the LRA has demonstrated greater longevity and garnered a reputation far more notorious than its predecessor.

Originally called the United Christian Democratic Army, the LRA was founded by Joseph Kony in 1987 (Van Acker, 2004). Aligning itself ideologically with Acholi nationalism, the group attracted a number of former soldiers let go from the Ugandan military under Southern regimes, and initially enjoyed some support from the Acholi political minority, which was located in the underdeveloped and economically desolate Northern region (Van Acker, 2004). Seeking to purify the Acholi population as a step toward liberating them from Southern rule, the LRA targeted villages across Acholiland, murdering or maiming those accused of disloyalty to their cause and infamously kidnapping children to use as soldiers or sex slaves (Human Rights Focus, 2002). In response to this strategy, Museveni’s National Resistance Movement (NRM) dominated government has conducted military operations in Acholiland, including the establishment of “protected villages,” which at one point housed up to 94% of the Acholi population, who moved to the camps either voluntarily or by force (Oosterom, 2016). The camps were disbanded once the LRA had largely migrated out of Uganda in 2006, but Kony and what is left of his followers remain at large.

Causes and Effects:

The KONY 2012 video narrates a simple story: a malicious individual and his cronies attack innocent civilians, most egregiously children. It is a compelling call to action; who would
not want to help the traumatized kids whose lives are turned upside down by Joseph Kony’s pointless vendetta? “Joseph Kony is fighting for nothing,” Jason Russell narrates, asserting that the LRA’s agenda is meaningless, and completely without support from any discernable source. But there is hope: the capture of Kony will end the problems in Acholiland, and permit the community to move on from the conflict. *KONY 2012* presents a completely de-politicized, oversimplified version of events, and in doing so ignores the larger issues plaguing the Acholi population.

In neglecting the political dynamics of the conflict, Invisible Children’s account fails to address its root causes, particularly the country’s North-South power struggle. The video’s few mentions of politics are limited to some Ugandan politicians who condemn the LRA, and segments focused on the politics of humanitarian intervention in the USA. There is no acknowledgement of the LRA’s political agenda (or at least the political motivations that drove many early supporters to the organization), and the ethnic, territorial and political rivalry between Acholi politics and Museveni’s NRM. Although the LRA realistically has no chance of seizing any political power or influence, the organization made its political ideals clear by abstaining from violence during elections and encouraging the Acholi people to go out and vote against the NRM (Van Acker, 2004).

This rivalry is an important element of the Acholi story because of NRM policy enacted during the height of LRA activity in Northern Uganda. Ugandan military operations in the North in the late 1980s and early 1990s often targeted civilians accused of supporting the LRA more so than the actual LRA, which continued to target Acholi civilians as well (Van Acker, 2004). In 1996, the Ugandan government implemented a policy of “protected villages,” which were military-controlled and guarded areas where Acholi people were remanded for their own safety
The army often forced unwilling individuals to migrate to these camps, using violence to do so. At the peak of this policy, about 94% of the Acholi population was forcibly displaced into these camps, cut off from their own lands and community ties (Oosterom, 2016). Restrictions on movement rendered the camp populations unable to partake in political processes, and thus this policy eliminated an entire anti-NRM voting bloc for the duration of its implementation (Oosterom, 2016).

Conditions in the “protected villages” may have claimed more lives than LRA violence. Provisions such as food and water were often insufficient to sustain the population, and as epidemics swept through the camps medicine could be hard to come by (Mamdani, 2010). An estimated 1,000 deaths per week resulting from sickness or starvation occurred in the camps at the height of the conflict (Mamdani, 2010). As camp residents were not allowed to leave, they could not procure food or medicine themselves and were left to the mercy of the often-neglectful soldiers who oversaw the camps.

Beyond the consequences of movement restriction and neglect, Acholi people in “protected villages” remained extremely vulnerable to violence from multiple sources. Guards typically failed to intervene when LRA aggression occurred in the camps, leaving high concentrations of Acholi people to fend for themselves, confined to an area they could not leave (Human Rights Focus, 2002). In addition to facing mutilation, kidnapping and murder at the hands of the LRA, camp inhabitants also remained vulnerable to the soldiers assigned to protect them (Human Rights Focus, 2002). Arbitrary arrest, torture, sexual assault and execution at the hands of the Ugandan military were a constant threat to the population in the camps (Human Rights Focus, 2002). And as they largely lacked political representation or access to justice, the victims of this violence also lacked recourse.
While the capture of Joseph Kony would not be a bad thing, it would not be adequate retribution for what the Acholi population has suffered. Apprehending Kony without holding Museveni’s government accountable for its harmful policies and grievous abuse of the Acholi community would only represent a partial justice. Museveni’s regime is arguably responsible for the deaths and suffering of more Acholi people than the LRA, yet Invisible Children make no attempt to unpack their role in the atrocities, preferring to put forth a strategy that addresses the symptoms of political conflict but not its causes.

**Shortsighted Strategy:**

Invisible Children poses a simple solution to the problems facing the Acholi in Northern Uganda: the capture of Joseph Kony. The video maintains that American reinforcements to help the Ugandan government and army will be vital to the mission, necessitating American involvement in Uganda’s domestic affairs. And in order to ensure that the US government sees that mission through, US citizens must continually pressure their representatives regarding action in Uganda. Although the millions of people who saw the video undoubtedly held good intentions, this strategy for obtaining justice through Kony’s capture is flawed in numerous ways.

*KONY 2012* portrays American citizens as the only individuals who can right the wrongs in Northern Uganda; in other words, this video buys into the “white savior complex” that plagues the humanitarian aid community. Rather than looking for ways in which Americans can support Ugandan-led efforts to bring Kony to justice, if that is even what Ugandan advocates would choose to do, Invisible Children presents itself and its supporters as the heroes who will solve the problem. And apparently the first step toward a solution would be to put up posters. While it is
important to raise awareness, much of the Invisible Children “action kit” seems more like a trendy advertising campaign than a serious effort to enact geopolitical change.

Further, the type of awareness raised by KONY 2012 is extremely problematic in that it omits the political history of the region. Americans petitioning their representatives in support of military aid to the Ugandan government after watching KONY 2012 likely did not realize that they were essentially asking for military support for the other major oppressors of the Acholi, who still stand to benefit from the elimination or disenfranchisement of the group. For this reason alone, apprehending Kony and his allies cannot be considered the ultimate solution to the problems faced by the Acholi people.

Even the plan laid out by the video to convince the American government to insert itself into the hunt for Kony is shortsighted. It seems that if enough popular support exists to force the hands of American politicians, military action will be swift and Kony will be apprehended before long. This vision demonstrates a lack of understanding of basic geography: while American specialists may have advanced technology and training, the LRA is undoubtedly more familiar with the terrain, and better able to travel through South Sudan, CAR and the DRC than those just learning the land. Further, the LRA’s political ties in (South) Sudan are a source of support (Van Acker, 2004). And should Kony continue to evade capture for a prolonged period, as he has, Invisible Children will have exhausted the energy that mobilized so many individuals to rally for the cause to begin with, and have little political capital leftover. The individuals behind KONY 2012 invested all of their resources into one approach, which happened to be a tone-deaf video telling an incomplete story which legitimizes the NRM government on an international stage, and failed to make any contingency plan for when, unsurprisingly, their strategy failed to make the long-term impact they had envisioned.
Prioritization and Allocation of Resources:

While *KONY 2012*’s plan to “cover the night” in Kony posters may have failed, and Kony himself continues to evade capture, *KONY 2012* did make some lasting impacts. Although Joseph Kony’s face did not adorn every available public surface on the morning of April 21st, the international attention garnered by Invisible Children did impact policy. President Barack Obama committed troops to the hunt for Kony both prior to and after the video, and the governments of both Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) dedicated an increase of troops and supplies to the mission (Memmott, 2014). Obviously, no one is opposed to capturing Kony, but there is the problem of prioritization. In a region fraught with conflict, should one man who is by all accounts past his prime be the top priority?

A documentary published by VICE News in December 2012 investigates the efforts to find Kony in the DRC, where he was thought to be hiding at the time. As the military hunts for the LRA in the bush, the M23 rebels in Eastern Kivu gain momentum, threatening the security and rule of law of the region (Stramowski, 2012). Yet, the global outcry following *KONY 2012* pressured the Congolese government to allocate its military resources to pursue the LRA. VICE correspondents travel to villages recently attacked by the LRA, and the local testimonies are drastically different from the story of *KONY 2012* (Stramowski, 2012). Less than a year after the video, individuals in the DRC explain that the bands of LRA fighters they have encountered are weak and disorganized; they attack when they are desperate for supplies but mostly avoid conflict (Stramowski, 2012). They seem mostly unfazed by the presence of the LRA in their regions, and the increased military presence has not demonstrably improved the security of the area (Stramowski, 2012).
KONY 2012 relies on the norms of the Western justice system in its quest to right the LRA’s wrongs. The video outlines a straightforward plan: find Kony, punish him, and ultimately give retribution to his many victims. But this assumes that this conception of justice is shared by Ugandans, specifically the Acholi, and that it will be the pinnacle. This outlook disregards local justice mechanisms in Acholiland, where reintegration of former soldiers has been underway for years (Ochen, 2014). These ceremonies focus on the purification of the individuals, who return to their communities, obtain forgiveness, and move forward (Ochen, 2014). Invisible Children’s approach assumes that justice is incomplete until Kony is captured, while local practices do not rely on the oppressor to allow the victims to move on.

Despite its good intentions, KONY 2012’s framing perpetuates an imperialist version of the institution of humanitarian aid. The suffering children in Uganda lack the agency the help themselves, and so the USA must swoop in to solve their problems. But by KONY 2012’s release, the height of the LRA’s reign of terror in Acholiland had passed, and reconciliation in the community was already underway. There are doubtlessly people in Acholiland who want to see Kony apprehended and tried, but the problem KONY 2012 is trying to solve no longer exists. Further, community development and justice mechanisms already were underway, presenting solutions to current problems in Acholiland. While humanitarian intervention is a noble venture in theory, in practice it often looks more like an imposition of an outsider’s perception of the best solution, rather than an appropriate solution to the problem at hand. KONY 2012 epitomizes this problem, demonstrating an outsider’s understanding of the conflict in Northern Uganda and proposing a solution based on that outsider’s norms.
Positive Impacts:

*KONY 2012*’s presentation of violence in Northern Uganda remains fatally flawed, but proponents of Invisible Children’s strategy can make some arguments in defense of the organization. The video did bring an enormous influx of money to Invisible Children, which in addition to printing posters funds programs in Uganda such as radio networks to inform rural communities of LRA action. Although the outpouring of monetary support has not been sustained in the years since *KONY 2012*’s release, it did enable to organization to invest a greater amount of money into programs on the ground (Sanders, 2014). Additionally, the video did provide an introduction to the recent history of Northern Uganda to millions of people with no prior exposure, hopefully encouraging them to look further into the situation. Finally, if the video does contribute to the eventual capture of Joseph Kony, few would find fault with that.

Programmatic Recommendations:

Had the makers of *KONY 2012* taken the time to analyze the impact of Uganda’s territorial, ethnic and political rivalries as they emerged post-independence, perhaps they could have correctly articulated the origins of the LRA. Further, a critical analysis of the relationships of LRA, the NRM and the Acholi people reveals the harmful impact of government policy on the Acholi in this era, and the incentive for the NRM government to enact it. With a full understanding of all the actors whose interests and violent acts converged to displace and disenfranchise the Acholi people, Invisible Children could have exposed all actors who did harm to the Acholi people, including the Acholi children. Admittedly, an accurate portrayal of a people in the process of reconciliation and peacebuilding in Acholiland as Kony and his cronies retreat to the bush with little hope of resurgence would almost certainly have failed to garner the
same attention as a video about children in peril and an evil mad man. But this begs the question, was there a purpose for this intervention campaign in the first place?

The most valuable lesson to be learned from the *KONY 2012* debacle is the importance of context. Building from an incomplete picture, the programs designed to work toward justice for victims of the LRA pursue only an incomplete justice through a narrow avenue. Future humanitarian intervention efforts must be informed by accurate knowledge to ensure that they are suited to the problems they aim to solve. Particularly in situations of emergency, it may not be possible to obtain all of the pertinent information in time, however a historical context should be taken into account at the bare minimum. The appropriate contexts in a given situation, whether historical, political or territorial, will help outsiders to formulate interventions which serve those they intend to help in a meaningful way, and to avoid doing unintentional harm.
References


