

KONY 2012 and the Prospects for Change

Examining the Viral Campaign

Mareike Schomerus, Tim Allen, and Koen Vlassenroot

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Article Summary and Author Biography

With more than 70 million views, KONY 2012 has achieved its aim of reaching a mass audience. But the film is a quintessentially American fable printed on an African canvas, one that will turn out to be a brief diversion, just a bit of Internet chatter.

MAREIKE SCHOMERUS is Research Consortium Director of the Justice and Security Research Programme at the London School of Economics. TIM ALLEN is a professor in Development Anthropology at the LSE and Research Director of the JSRP. KOEN VLASSENROOT is a professor in the Conflict Research Group at the University of Ghent, a consortium partner of the JSRP.

The success of the "KONY 2012" video shows the vast reserves of idealism and concern out there. Here is how to turn that concern into useful action.



From the Internet to a street corner in Austin, the KONY 2012 campaign has gone viral in an unprecedented way. (Robert Raines / flickr)

Earlier this month, more than 30 civilians were killed during armed attacks in South Kivu, in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Those killings were committed not by the Lord's Resistance Army but by one of the many Congolese militias operating in the area. In recent months, those groups have been responsible for a marked increase

in violence, but in most cases, such attacks go unnoticed by international media. So it was in this case: as usual, it is only thanks to local sources that we know about such events at all.

The lack of attention is ironic at the moment because of the sudden popularity of the KONY 2012 video campaign. Invisible Children, a nonprofit, has focused the world on Joseph Kony, who heads the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group established in the mid-1980s to fight the government of Uganda that has gained a reputation for its extreme acts, including the mutilation of victims and the forced enlistment of children. Six years ago, the Lord's Resistance Army left Uganda during a peace process; it is now operating in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan.

The notion that Kony might be handed over to the ICC and publicly prosecuted in The Hague seems unlikely.

With more than 70 million views so far, Invisible Children's documentary on YouTube, coupled with a stupendously successful viral media campaign, has achieved its aim of reaching a mass audience. In addition to the attention it has attracted on social networks in the United States and Europe, it has garnered mainstream media attention: nearly every major Western news outlet ran some kind of story last week on Kony or on Invisible Children's campaign.

However, people living in LRA-affected regions have been quick to criticize KONY 2012 as simplistic and naïve. The flash movement's message, so the feeling goes, neglects local realities of past and present. Ugandan bloggers, opposition politicians, and victims have spoken out. For example, the leader of the Ugandan Democratic Party, Norbert Mao (who appears in the KONY 2012 video), has pointed to the lack of attention given to atrocities committed by the Ugandan army, and the blogger Rosebell Kagumire has taken issue with the idea that the good guys -- "the mighty West" -- must save Africa from one bad guy. Meanwhile, Victor Ochen, who grew up in a northern Ugandan displacement camp and now runs the African Youth Initiative Network, has argued that the solution that Invisible Children offers will not improve victims' lives. In the areas where the LRA operates today, residents' main concerns involve the general lack of security -- including protection from Ugandan or Congolese army operations. In short, KONY 2012 misses the point.

But watching the film, it is clear that the campaign was not aimed primarily at reversing conflict dynamics in Central Africa. KONY 2012 is a quintessentially American fable printed on an African canvas, one that has sparked a vigorous debate over how far accuracy can be stretched for a good cause, how to harness the power of social media, and what the role of the United States in ending conflicts far away from home should be. Perhaps not surprisingly, the demand it makes -- to somehow apprehend Kony by military means, with U.S. help as the only solution -- is illogical and uninformed.

Sadly, for many concerned viewers in the United States and other rich countries, KONY 2012 may turn out to be a brief diversion, just a bit of Internet chatter. As things stand, this sudden fountain of attention and goodwill is unlikely to make the situation better in Central Africa.

The film that started it all was *Invisible Children: Rough Cut* (2004), a moving portrayal of the plight of a few selected English-speaking "night commuters" -- children who took refuge in Gulu, in northern Uganda, to escape abduction by the LRA in the country's more rural areas. Viewers of *Invisible Children: Rough Cut* learned that sleeping on the streets of Gulu was safer than staying outside the town, but they were left in the dark about atrocities committed by the Ugandan army against the civilians it purported to be protecting, and the long-term marginalization of the region by the Ugandan government. The film also ignored the hundreds of thousands of children and adults who remained in government displacement camps, stationed too far away to walk to the big towns. Living conditions in those camps were atrocious, far worse than in the environs of Gulu. *Invisible Children: Rough Cut* gave such a narrow portrayal that it inadvertently lent support to oppressive government anti-insurgency policies and ended up focusing attention on what was probably the safest place in the war-affected region.

Likewise, *KONY 2012* packs a superbly produced emotional punch through deployment of partial fact. Some parts of the original film live on and are passed off as representing aspects of the contemporary situation. Jacob Acaye, one of the "night commuters," returns as an adult, to demonstrate that *Invisible Children* has made a difference in his life. Filmmaker Jason Russell also included shots of himself with his young son having fun with computer graphics of blowing people up -- coupled with uplifting suggestions that this video is a way for everyone in the world to connect.

The film reports that Kony has captured more than 30,000 children and implies that these children can return home, as Jacob Acaye did, if Kony is captured. Among the many estimates, that figure of 30,000 is modest, but what is important is that nobody actually knows exact figures. The 30,000 number likely comes from a widely cited UNICEF survey of abductions between 1997 and 2001. During that time, 28,903 people had been taken by the LRA -- some for short amounts of time, such as one day. The most intense period of abductions occurred soon after peace talks failed in 1996. UNICEF established that less than a third of those abducted were below the age of 18; about 45 percent were between 18 and 45. But the fact is that these data are more than a decade old. Today, it is unlikely that the LRA consists of more than a few hundred people.

For those involved in the painstaking work of peacebuilding over the years, other aspects of the *KONY 2012* video are infuriating. The film neglects the peace talks that took place in Juba between 2006 and 2008, a factor that contributed to the withdrawal of the LRA from northern Uganda, and it does not even mention the subsequent U.S.-supported and botched military strike against the LRA that put an end to those negotiations in December 2008 and triggered the return to war. Without that context, there is no way for viewers to understand the way LRA violence spread across the borders of South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic, the result of which today is widespread insecurity.

In *KONY 2012*, the Ugandan and Congolese armies get a free pass. Recent evidence points to rape, looting, and illegal resource exploitation by soldiers in the locations where they have been sent to chase down Kony. Truth be told, the LRA has actually become a relatively minor player in a generally violent environment -- a fact well known to researchers and aid workers but neglected in the film.

Such nuance has been set aside through the way in which Invisible Children has harnessed social media. KONY 2012 bills itself as an experiment at "making Joseph Kony a household name, not to celebrate him, but to bring his crimes to the light" and to "go after policy-makers." These are U.S. policymakers, who, the video explains, have the power to back U.S. military support. The film quotes Louis Moreno Ocampo, the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the implication is that the U.S. military would arrest Kony so he can face charges in The Hague.

It's an interesting proposition, because the United States is not a member of the ICC, and so far, the official justification for Washington's involvement in Uganda was that it was in the interest of U.S. national security, rather than in the interest of international justice. Recently, the Obama administration has signaled an end to the hostile relationship between the ICC and Washington, but whether this will go as far as using U.S. military to execute ICC warrants remains to be seen.

Hidden behind these confusing messages is another issue. If the film were actually about change, it might have addressed its own paradox: that trying yet again to end a military conflict with more of the same sort of military engagement will probably cost too many civilian lives. Alas, there is no real solution offered here, only publicity. And raising consciousness would be great, if coupled with long-term informed attention rather than a mainly U.S.-based buzz.

But let's end on a more positive note. The notion that Kony might be handed over to the ICC and publicly prosecuted in The Hague seems unlikely. But who knows -- the publicity may make Kony consider handing himself in. He has talked about doing this in the past in exchange for being allowed to give testimony about crimes committed by the Ugandan army in this conflict. If this happens, it could lead to a sustained and serious international gaze at the failures of governance in Central Africa in which so many are complicit -- not just local governments and armed factions like the LRA but also international actors. If KONY 2012 can really be about ending impunity, and if it can distance itself from just scapegoating Kony (bad as he is), then the awesome levels of mass mobilization already attained may not be wasted after all.