

Why the 'Hipster' Generation-Y Africa Movement Must Evolve

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We are getting old. We, the college youth of the mid-to-late-noughties who [rallied with, camped out for](#), and through our collective voice and energy built Invisible Children into the explosive movement it became.

We, who at the height of our youthful idealism, energetically trailed nonprofits in beat-up old vans in the same doe-eyed (or red-eyed) way that groupies followed the Grateful Dead, The Rolling Stones, and The Beatles. We actually made rock stars out of nonprofit executives.

We, who bought shoes, whistles, bracelets, necklaces, and replaced "selfless giving" with "selfish giving" by demanding more for our donations; something we could have, share, show off, or promote as world's greatest do-gooders ever.

We, who fueled the [Gen-Y cause-consumer](#) market by wearing our care and fashioning our cause. [Supporting charity wasn't a tax-exempt afterthought; it was a lifestyle.](#) And a trendy one. To care about 'Africa' was hip. To buy something and support 'Africa' was even hipper. To go there and 'do something about' it was, OMG, the hippest, not to mention sexy in a messiah kind of way.

We are getting older. And the movement we built, which was also built for us, is changing. Like Jason Russell and many of his friends, we are having kids, buying homes, building careers, and facing a new set of problems in the "real world" which drive our attention and identities away from the causes and organizations that once defined us. Life for the "pampered" generation may finally be getting tougher. We are becoming more critical, analytical, rational and judgmental. We are, *GASP!*, growing up and maturing. And so are our idealistic tendencies.

All this brings me to one point. [Kony 2012, and the media spasm that ensued, was a monumental tipping point for the idealists of my generation.](#) It rapidly exposed an underlying set of problems, and challenged an entire movement's misrepresentation and misunderstanding of a continent. The Nairobi I write from today is not the same 'Africa' we were once sold as college students. Let me explain.

The 'Africa' we were sold was a mosaic of powerful imagery and stories, carefully crafted and broadly packaged -- whether in a shoebox or an "Action Kit". [It was a magnificently beautiful](#)

disaster filled with simplified problems, simplified solutions. Good guys. Bad guys. Warlords. Saviors. If things were good, big black mamas in colorful dresses would dance on dusty courtyards to heavy drums. If things were bad, a frail mother looking destitute with three starving children clawing at their feet, or a kid with an AK47, would stare directly at the camera.

Basically, 'Africa' is at its core a marketing strategy based off of a narrative penned hundreds of years ago and refined after de-colonization. Africa, on the other hand is actually Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Reunion, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

For the past few weeks, many very well-intentioned friends in the US have been asking for my response to Kony 2012, because I live in Kenya, and I like to write critically about aid, development, and how the media represents and [misrepresents](#) it all. The Kony 2012 video hits sharp nerves in all three areas, but still, I have had trouble formulating the thoughts I want to express, and the words to explain it.

Really, what is there that hasn't been said already? There's the "[White Savior Industrial Complex](#)," and the [inaccuracies](#) of the campaign messaging itself. There are the problems of a "good vs evil" argument, and the issue with a guy from California using his kid to "[edumacate us](#)" about Africa. Finances, stereotypes, the corrupt Ugandan army... the list goes on.

Kony 2012 represents a million and one things about how international aid is a messy and often murky business. It illustrates and illuminates stereotypes, false narratives, and nonprofit marketing done tremendously well, yet tragically wrong.

At the same time, it is one of the most important videos of my generation. And not just because of its astronomical number of YouTube views.

Instead of blindly believing in a romanticized vision or idealized solution of 'Africa,' the backlash of Kony 2012 has proven we are now actively engaging in a discussion around how Africa is represented, portrayed, and "solved". We are finally beginning to recognize the problems. We are talking, and more importantly we are debating.

We may be getting older, but we're only just waking up.

We can be sold, but only so much. We can care, but only with so much emotion. We can believe, but our beliefs can be tested. We bought what we were sold for years- the shirts, bracelets, shoes, hats, posters, stickers- whatever it took to fuel and fund "change". It was good- and broadly speaking it was FOR good. It made us truly feel we had the power to change the world. Yet in many cases we were fed simple, incomplete narratives. We were given only a part of the story -- the marketable part.

When the troubles with Kony 2012 came to light, when we suddenly realized that this was a cause whose clock had practically expired, when the "call to action" was so over-simplified and packaged in a way that it mocked the movement itself (everything we need to fuel a revolution in a cardboard box!), something died inside us. Authenticity was lost. Trust in those who once led and moved us was broken. What Greg Mortonson and the [3 Cups of Tea debacle](#) did for my mother and her book-club friends, Kony 2012 did for us.

For a long time, poverty, problems, and easily marketable solutions were built and sold upon a rotting narrative of 'Africa,' propelled by the proliferation of powerful visual media like Invisible Children's videos. Yet dreaming of and promoting 'Africa' isn't helping anyone anymore. You might solve 'Africa's' problems with an Action Kit, but it won't do a damn thing for Africa.

Perhaps I'm reading this all wrong. Perhaps I'm speaking for a small minority of people. Maybe I am slightly disgruntled because I don't believe a shoe, a bracelet, or anything else you buy will necessarily change a systematic problem of governance, accountability, debt and dependency that keeps most developing countries from actually developing.

Yet I believe the Kony 2012 earthquake and subsequent shockwaves of public discourse -- long-overdue discussions about marketing 'Africa,' the moral, ethical, and personal motivations of aid work, and the overall effectiveness of nonprofits, points to something. **As my generation gets older, as we lose our collective idealism, it doesn't mean that we are becoming cynical.** Nor does it mean we are becoming less charitable. **It means that we are beginning to engage more with the complexity of the situations, instead of blindly accepting one version of it.**

We may finally be waking up to Africa as a set of complex realities, and saying goodbye to 'Africa' as the simplified, commoditized, and romanticized narrative the West has been marketing for so long. It may not be as cool sounding, it may not be as easy to sell to a bunch of college kids, and it definitely won't come in a neatly packaged action kit. But it will certainly have a better chance of making a real difference.