

SIMPLIFIED CAMPAIGN NARRATIVES ON CIVIL WAR: CASE STUDY OF “KONY 2012”

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Résumé

Des récits souvent simplificateurs dominent au sein des comptes rendus sur les conflits en Afrique sub-saharienne. Ils dépeignent un tableau fait de misère et de carnages, de seigneurs de guerre et de violences ethniques. En règle générale, ces narrations portent avant tout sur les symptômes, tandis qu’elles omettent ou simplifient à outrance les causes sous-jacentes des conflits. Des récits simples et sans nuances peuvent être très efficaces pour capter l’attention des lecteurs ou pour réunir des fonds. En revanche, une évaluation critique est indispensable quand des récits trop simplifiés se mettent à prendre de l’influence dans la formation des opinions publiques au sujet de la résolution des conflits et dans la définition de stratégies d’intervention à adopter.

Dans le présent article, nous évaluons aussi bien ce qui peut servir de justification à ces récits simplifiés, que les dangers bien réels que ces récits représentent, en prenant comme exemple la campagne « Kony 2012 » qui réduisit le conflit ougandais si complexe à une pénible caricature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The long-standing conflict in northern Uganda between the Uganda People’s Defence Forces (UPDF) and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has been described as “one of the world’s most neglected crises”¹ and as “the biggest forgotten humanitarian emergency in the world”². Since March 2012, it may well have become the most well-known conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa. On March 5, 2012, the US-based non-profit organization Invisible Children released an internet video called “Kony 2012”, the purpose being to make indicted Ugandan war criminal Joseph Kony internationally known in order to arrest and prosecute him for war crimes and crimes against humanity³. Within six days, the stop Kony 2012 campaign had exceeded 100 million views on the internet⁴, thereby becoming the fastest online campaign to exceed 100 million viewers⁵. Easily beating previous records set by video releases of internationally known stars, including Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber, the Kony 2012 video is perceived as a social media phenomenon.

But, how big is the gap between well-known and well-understood? The success of the campaign in bringing a forgotten and neglected conflict in

¹ CAKAJ, L., “The Lord’s Resistance Army of Today”, Washington, DC, Enough Project, November 1, 2010, http://www.enoughproject.org/files/lra_today.pdf.

² INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, “Northern Uganda: Understanding and solving the conflict”, 2004 Nairobi/Brussels.

³ DRABBLE, E., “How to teach Kony 2012”, London, *The Guardian*, April 23, 2012.

⁴ 74 million on YouTube and 38 million viewers from the 750+ clips uploaded by different audiences across the web. Source: Visible Measures, March 12, 2012.

⁵ TAUB, A., “Beyond Kony2012: Atrocity, Awareness, & Activism in the Internet Age”, Kampala, Leanpub, 2012.

the spotlight is applauded, but at the same time the campaign has received serious criticism, for example for over-simplifying the LRA conflict, transmitting misleading information, failing to appropriately sketch the context for the LRA insurgency, portraying Africans as either feeble victims or ruthless killers, and pushing for a military intervention as the only solution. The mixed response to the Kony 2012 campaign therefore presents a challenge to advocacy groups. Simplifying a complex conflict is potentially dangerous, because it may come with ramifications – the kind of ramifications which significantly could overshadow or prevent the intervention from realizing its objectives. It also raises the interesting question on whether and how advocacy groups can simplify a conflict in order to attract the attention of a wide public. What are the limits of simplification?

Kony 2012 is not the first campaign that brings this question to the surface. Simplified narratives have for a long time played an important role in the discourse on conflict, and have motivated international strategies for intervention in conflicts in Africa.

For example Autesserre⁶ carefully demonstrates how and why certain narratives on the conflict in eastern Congo came to dominate and steer the international agenda. She argues that, when faced with a complex conflict, simple narratives become a necessity to help dissect and simplify a complex situation, allowing the general public and policy makers to summarize the causes of the conflict in a few lines, define the line between the victims and the perpetrators and identify who deserves more support or who should be castigated. In the case of DRC, the three narratives that Autesserre demonstrates to dominate the news reports and public opinion are (1) the illegal exploitation of mineral resources as the primary cause of violence, (2) sexual abuse of women and girls as the main consequence, and (3) extending state authority as the central solution. The unintended consequences of these narratives, Autesserre argues, are severe and include the ignorance of other root causes, a neglect of other consequences, the increased use of sexual violence as a war strategy for militia to draw attention and gain a high profile, and a blind eye for rampant state failure and abuse.

We argue that the Kony 2012 campaign is another textbook example of a simplified campaign narrative. In what follows, we evaluate the key narratives of the campaign, study how they fit into already existing storylines of the LRA conflict, and discuss the response of different actors to the narratives.

We start with an overview of the conflict and an outline of the main arguments in the debate on the use of narratives.

⁶ AUTESSERRE, S., “Dangerous tales: dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences”, *African Affairs*, 2012, pp. 202-222.

2. THE CONFLICT IN NORTHERN UGANDA

2.1. The LRA and the historical roots of the conflict

The roots of the conflict in northern Uganda can be situated in the British colonial period, when northern and southern Uganda were treated differently: northerners, and particularly the Acholi ethnic group, were seen as ‘natural fighters’ and mainly recruited for the army; while southerners were employed in the civil service. Whereas cash crops and industry were introduced in the south, northerners were used as cheap labour⁷⁸. As a result, a regional division was introduced between northern and southern Uganda, in which the South received economic development and political power, and the North was largely marginalized. This division persisted in the post-colonial period; and the Acholi remained the most important force within the army. As the army was used as a violent tool by the regime in power against political opponents (and their ethnic group), the Acholi were involved in a number of atrocities in the post-colonial period. For example, in 1983 they were involved in Obote’s ‘Operation Bonanza’ in which more than 300,000 people were killed in Luwero⁹. The Acholi were held largely responsible for this. Things changed for the Acholi in July 1985 when a group of Acholi soldiers, led by Lieutenant-General Basilio Olara-Okello and General Tito Okello Lutwa, overthrew the Obote II regime. The Acholi, who had always been politically and socioeconomically marginalized, were suddenly holding top-positions in politics and the military. This was however short-lived, as in January 1986, current President Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) captured Kampala. As a result, the Acholi suddenly lost all their newly acquired power. Moreover, they feared reprisals for the atrocities committed by the army – which they had dominated in most of the post-colonial period – and for which they were held responsible. They therefore fled back to northern Uganda. Several incidents contributed to the fear that genocide was going to take place on the Acholi. In this context, a number of rebel groups emerged in order to protect the Acholi, and fight the Museveni government. The main ones were Uganda’s People Defence Army (UPDA), the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF) led by Alice Lakwena, which was active from January up to September 1987, and the Lord’s Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony which started around the same period¹⁰.

⁷ BRANCH, A., “Uganda’s Civil War and the Politics of ICC Intervention”, *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 2, 2007, pp. 179–198.

⁸ DOOM, R., VLASSENROOT, K., “Kony’s message: a new *koine*? The Lord’s Resistance Army in Northern Uganda”, *African Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 390, 1999, pp. 5–36.

⁹ DOOM, R., VLASSENROOT, K., *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ BRANCH, A. *op. cit.*. Kony tried to become part of the HSMF but was rejected by Alice Lakwena. Allegedly, she and Kony are cousins. DOOM, R., VLASSENROOT, K., *op. cit.*, p. 21.

Similar to the HSMF, the LRA presented itself as a spiritual savior, relying on spirituality as an answer to a deep political, economic and social crisis. There were, however, a number of striking differences between the LRA and the previous rebel movements: first, the movement soon started attacking the civilian population, which it accused of collaborating with the government. In doing so, the movement was using extremely brutal violence, in order to maximize its impact. The LRA also abducted a large number of civilians, among which many children, which had to serve as child soldiers.¹¹ Second, from 1994 onwards, the movement became part of broader geopolitical dynamics: it was supported by Sudan, which was supplying the LRA with weapons and a safe haven, in revenge for Uganda's support to the SPLA¹². When Sudan came under strong international criticism and pressure for supporting terrorist movements after 9/11, their support to the LRA in theory came to an end, but in practice there have been large and continuous suspicions that actors within the Khartoum regime continued supporting the LRA.

From 2006 onwards, the movement stopped its operations in Uganda, and fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo. After staying in Garamba National Park, the LRA moved further North, now operating in the border region between the Central African Republic, the DRC and South Sudan.

Throughout its existence, its political agenda has consistently waxed and waned. When the LRA was first created, it thrived on the deeply entrenched political and economic disparities between the North and South – something which continues to exist up to today and has even widened, while the West and central part of Uganda have thrived economically. During peace negotiations which happened throughout the history of the conflict, this claim still is at the heart of the LRA's political agenda. On other occasions, the movement has tried to communicate its political agenda to the population in northern Uganda – for example through the distribution of political manifestos, articulating political grievances¹³. However, although the LRA still claims to be fighting for the plight of the Acholi people, this claim has lost credibility as the Acholi are the main victims of the atrocities

¹¹ However, as specific research on this issue has demonstrated, the number of children involved tends to be exaggerated, while the involvement of adults tends to be underreported (TIM, A., SCHOMERUS, M., "A hard homecoming: lessons learned from the reception center process in northern Uganda: an independent study", An Independent Study Commissioned by USAID and UNICEF, Management Systems International, Washington, 2006; DOLAN, C. G., *Understanding War and its discontinuation: the case of northern Uganda*. London School of Economics and Political Sciences, submitted for the degree of PhD, 2005, p. 72.

¹² PRUNIER, G., "Rebel movements and proxy warfare: Uganda, Sudan and the Congo (1986-1999)", *African Affairs*, Vol. 103, No. 412, 2004, pp. 359-383.

¹³ DOLAN, C. G., *op. cit.*; FINNSTROM, S., "An African hell of colonial imagination? The Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, another story", in: ALLEN, T., VLASSENROOT, K. (Eds), *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, London/New York, Zed Books, 2010, pp. 75-93.

of the LRA¹⁴. In this situation, war has become an end in itself, and violence has reinforced further violence, resulting in extreme acts of terror on the population. Also the LRA's secrecy, its current lack of political wing, and the distance between its representatives in peace negotiations and the military wing stand in the way of the development of a clear political agenda¹⁵. The Lord's Resistance Movement – the political wing of the LRA – was mostly active in the 1990s, e.g. in issuing political statements. In the last 2 years, Justine Nyeko Labeja, the LRA/M peace delegate leader, has consistently been issuing press releases, but the link with the LRA seems very weak.¹⁶

2.2. Efforts for peaceful conflict resolution vs military approach

Throughout the history of the conflict, a number of efforts have been undertaken to end the conflict, with an alteration of military action and efforts at a peaceful resolution. The first attempt for a military resolution occurred in 1991, when the government of Uganda launched the “Operation North” which was aimed at denying LRA support from the local people in northern Uganda, but was also brutal in its anti-insurgency tactics, and strongly alienated the civilian population from the government through this brutal approach¹⁷. Through this operation, the LRA was severely weakened, after which peace negotiations were opened in 1992, which constituted the first communication between President Museveni and Joseph Kony. The talks were mediated by Betty Bigombe, a respected Acholi leader and the then Minister in-charge of northern Uganda¹⁸. These talks were initially successful, leading to a cease-fire and safe-conduct guarantees, and raising hopes for peace. In addition, the LRA was at its weakest point after suffering several military losses at the hands of the UPDF; and many local Acholi people and even the LRA leadership were in full support of the Bigombe peace talks. Yet, when Kony asked for a delay of six months instead of the initial

¹⁴ LOMO, Z., HOVIL, L., *Behind the violence: causes, consequences and the search for solutions to the war in northern Uganda*, Refugee Law Project Working Paper no. 11, Kampala, Refugee Law Project, 2004, http://www.refugeelawproject.org/working_papers/RLP.WP11.pdf.

¹⁵ HENDRICKSON, D., TUMUTEGYEREIZE, K., *Dealing with complexity in peace negotiations: A reflection on the Lord's Resistance Army and the Juba talks*, London, Conciliation Resources, 2012.

¹⁶ E.g. in response to the US decision to send troops (19-11-2011), on the occasion of Uganda's independence day (09-10-2011) or to the Kony 2012 campaign (04-04-12).

¹⁷ ALLEN, T., VLASSENROOT, K. (Eds), *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁸ Presently a state minister in President Museveni's government, Ms Bigombe became an independent negotiator when she decided to take a leave of absence from her lucrative job at the World Bank to mediate talks between the LRA and the Ugandan government. Also former minister in-charge of northern Uganda, Ms Bigombe met a number of times with Mr Kony and President Museveni during her failed attempt to bring the two key individuals in the conflict to an agreement.

three months for final negotiation, Museveni lost all confidence, and announced an ultimatum of one week.

Thereafter, the negotiations completely collapsed¹⁹. The LRA and Joseph Kony lost interest in the negotiations with the government and felt betrayed by the Acholi elders whom he had entrusted with negotiating peace on his behalf. Throughout this period, the movement also started receiving support from Sudan. This marked the start of the most brutal phase of the conflict: Sudan was used as a safe haven, and violent attacks were launched in northern Uganda. In the changed geo-political landscape of the war on terrorism, in March 2002, Uganda and Sudan, the two countries accusing each other of sponsoring proxy wars, agreed to launch “Operation Iron Fist”—a military offensive against the LRA with an amnesty for the LRA combatants who agreed to surrender²⁰. The two countries also agreed to a peace agreement according to which both Uganda and Sudan promised to halt their military support for the LRA and SPLA respectively. However, the operation brought more harm than good. As the UPDF was entering Sudan, the LRA left Sudan and moved back into Uganda. They spread their civilian attacks from the Acholi to Teso and Lango sub-regions, attacking innocent civilians and abducting hundreds of children and women in retaliation attacks²¹.

Throughout this time, local peace activists (such as the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative) had kept communication channels with the LRA open, encouraging the LRA to enter into peace negotiations. This materialized in 2004, when Betty Bigombe was again brought to northern Uganda and started a new round of negotiations. This led to a (frequently extended) ceasefire. However, the negotiations collapsed in February 2005 when chief LRA negotiator Sam Kolo had to be rescued by the UPDF, apparently because Kony had turned against him²². As these negotiations had reached a stalemate, Riek Machar, the new vice-president of southern Sudan, presented himself as a mediator, which led to another round of negotiations in Juba from 2006. These talks were seen as an opportunity to end the conflict through peaceful means because, for the first time in the history of the conflict, regional and international actors invested their time and energy into the Juba talks. However, these negotiations too collapsed in December 2008, when Kony refused to sign the final agreement.

The repeated failure of peace talks gave way to a new wave of military actions. With the help of DRC, CAR, South Sudan and USA’s surveillance information, the Ugandan military on December 14, 2008 launched the

¹⁹ DOOM, R., VLASSENROOT, K., *op. cit.*, pp. 5-36.

²⁰ SOMERVILLE, K., “Uganda’s rebels keep the faith”, London, BBC World Service, July 3, 2002.

²¹ DUNN, C. K., *Imagining the Congo: The international relations of identity*, New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

²² ALLEN, T., VLASSENROOT, K., *op. cit.*, pp. 20-200.

“Operation Lightning Thunder” which was aimed at either capturing or killing Kony and inflicting a final blow to the LRA. This operation failed to achieve its objective since neither Kony nor any of his senior commanders were captured or killed. If anything, the operation led to an escalation of violence. The LRA devised new methods of survival by dividing itself into small units, some as few as five or six men, and started retaliation attacks in Congo, CAR, and South Sudan. The UN and other humanitarian agencies estimate that the LRA slaughtered approximately 400 civilians between December 25 to December 30, 2008²³. Between December 2009 and May 2010, they attacked a number of villages. The death toll in these communities was estimated at 189 people by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; while higher estimates, up to 865 were put forward by Human Rights Watch in its report entitled “*The Christmas Massacres*”²⁴.

Despite the rise in committed atrocities, the LRA’s capacities were seriously weakened through this military effort: the movement is estimated to be between 200 to 400 fighters, and is currently perceived to be operating in ‘survival mode’: its targeted, large-scale attacks seem to have ceased, as well its large-scale abductions. Instead, the movement is mainly focusing on looting food and supplies – abductions only happen for short-time, in order to transport food. However, and as shown by the above massacres, the movement does not need many troops to provoke a maximum of damage. As a recent diagnostic study of the International Working Group on the LRA summarizes: “In short, the effectiveness of the LRA does not depend on its size but on its deliberate use of terror attacks, its exploitation of the weaknesses of opposing armies, an understanding of its own strengths and weaknesses, and its strategic selection of areas of operation that cut across national boundaries and military areas of responsibility.”²⁵ In this sense, although to a great extent the LRA’s level of activity has diminished compared to 1997, it still remains a serious obstacle to peace in its area of activity, which currently includes eastern DRC and the Central African Republic. By extension, the group also remains a threat to peace in South Sudan and northern Uganda.

Since the end of the Juba talks, there has been less appetite for talks on the part of the Ugandan government and in the diplomatic circles, as they feel that the LRA blew the many chances offered. Some religious groups and NGOs in northern Uganda, DRC and CAR, continue to argue for a comprehensive approach for ending the conflict, including the revival of the Juba peace process²⁶. In fact, a wide rift emerged between the government and its

²³ BBC WORLD SERVICE, “Christmas massacres ‘killed 400’”, London, December 30, 2008.

²⁴ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, “The Christmas massacres. LRA attacks on civilians in northern Congo”, New York, 2009.

²⁵ LANCASTER, P., LACAILLE, G., CAKAJ, L., “Diagnostic Study of the Lord’s Resistance Army”, International Working Group on the LRA, Washington, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, June 2011, p. 6.

²⁶ HENDRICKSON, D., TUMUTEGYEREIZE, K., *op. cit.*

search for a military solution, and these civil society organizations. The role and viewpoints of local civil society groupings should not be overlooked as they have been instrumental in the search for peaceful resolutions in the past. Particularly from the mid-nineties onwards, three important civil society groups became active in the search for peace: the diaspora civil society group Kacokke Madit²⁷, the Acholi Religious Leaders's Peace Initiative, and the Acholi "traditional leaders"²⁸. These different groupings organized several meetings in search for peaceful solutions to the conflict, raised international awareness on the issue, kept the communication channels with the LRA open, and confronted government misdemeanors. However, more often than not, these efforts led to frustration, even to the extent that civil society representatives were ambushed.²⁹

2.3. The ICC

As fighting between the Ugandan military and the LRA rebels raged on in northern Uganda and the eastern DRC, significant developments were unfolding in the International Criminal Justice arena. In 1993, the world witnessed the creation of International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). This was followed by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). On July 1, 2002 the Rome Statute which created the International Criminal Court (ICC) came into force. As a result of this multilateral Rome statute, the ICC became a permanent body with jurisdiction over certain categories of crimes like genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression (Article 5). Acting under the Roma statute, Uganda, which ratified the Statute on June 14, 2002, referred the LRA case and Joseph Kony to the ICC in December 2003³⁰.

In July 2004, ICC chief prosecutor, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, officially opened investigations into crimes committed by the LRA. On July 8, 2005, the court issued an arrest warrant against Joseph Kony, his deputy Vincent Otti, and top commanders Raska Lukwiya, Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen. These five LRA leaders were charged with crimes against humanity and war crimes, including murder, rape, sex slavery, and enlisting of children as combatants. The warrants were filed under seal; public redacted versions were released on 13 October 2005³¹.

²⁷ KACOKKE MADIT (KM) "is a non-partisan and non-profit making forum dedicated to working for a resolution of the northern Uganda conflict so as to achieve lasting peace and reconciliation".

²⁸ DOLAN, C. G., *op. cit.*, p. 40.

²⁹ RODRIGUEZ, S. C., *Tall Grass. Stories of suffering and peace in northern Uganda*, Kampala, Fountain Publishers, 2009.

³⁰ CLARK, N. J., "The ICC, Uganda and the LRA: Re-Framing the Debate", *African Studies*, Vol. 69, No. 1, 2009, pp. 141-160.

³¹ *Ibid.*

The ICC move to have Kony tried of war crimes in the Hague has since stirred critics both from within Uganda and the international community. Those against the ICC move base their argument on mainly three grounds. First, that peace must come before justice and therefore the arrest warrant diminishes any prospects for the peaceful resolution of the conflict.³² Second, that the ICC's hand in the conflict undermines traditional and indigenous forms of justice, which are locally respected and accepted – particularly reference is made to 'Mato Oput'. Some argue that trials should be held in Uganda: there are provisions within the Rome Statute to enable trials to be heard in Uganda.³³ Third, there are those who question the neutrality of the ICC in this conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government. As will be described later in the paper, the Ugandan government (and particularly the UPDF) has also conducted a range of human rights abuses in this conflict; and many human rights activists argue that justice can only be found if these crimes are also brought to justice³⁴. The fact that ICC prosecutor Louis Morino Ocampo announced the indictment of Kony during a press conference joint with the Uganda government, one of the parties to the conflict, did not help matters either – this unprecedented move by the ICC has attracted criticism from within Uganda and outside the country.

To reinforce regional efforts against LRA, the U.S. President Barack Obama in May 2009 signed into law *the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and northern Uganda Recovery Act*, a legislation that makes it a USA policy to either kill or capture Kony. Through their continuous lobby efforts, an active American humanitarian lobby – consisting of organizations such as the Enough project and Invisible Children – played an important role in the realization of this act. In line with this policy, on October 14, 2010, President Obama announced the decision to send 100 US soldiers to Uganda to help regional forces fighting Kony. The hi-tech-equipped combat troops are currently providing surveillance information and advice to regional forces involved in combat operations in what has been dubbed a "kill or capture" operation³⁵.

3. THE NATURE OF NARRATIVES

A narrative can be defined as a well-crafted, powerful story that is able to connect to peoples' emotions³⁶. In most cases, a campaign narrative builds on an already existing storyline which provides it with a new connota-

³² For the debate on this, see for example HOVIL, L., QUINN, J. "Peace first, justice later: traditional justice in northern Uganda", *Refugee Law Project Working Paper*, no. 17, July 2005.

³³ We thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this point.

³⁴ BRANCH, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 179–198.

³⁵ BBC WORLD SERVICE, "USA to send troops to Uganda to help fight LRA rebels", London, October 14, 2011,

³⁶ AUTESSERRE, S., *op. cit.*

tion that keeps it memorable. One of the most important attributes of a narrative is that it helps us to connect the social world and the material world together thereby influencing how we behave in our environment. In general, narratives carry a central frame or a multiplicity of frames³⁷. These frames are very important because they define our understanding of what a particular crisis may be (for example, a brutal merciless armed group that is killing innocent civilians) and what should be done (military intervention). In terms of visibility, frames promote events and make them easily identifiable by fronting them in a catchy and emotional manner (sexual violence against women and children) and overshadow those which are intended not to attract much attention (government failures).

Bakke examines why certain narratives are able to gain a near universal acceptance, resonate quickly and successfully and are effective in influencing action, while others get rejected³⁸. He concludes that the acceptance of a narrative largely depends on the key frames it contains. Well framed narratives are those that assign factors responsible for the crisis to premeditated behaviors of individuals and are able to clearly identify the individuals responsible. Specifically, such narratives become successful when they include “badly harm to vulnerable individuals, specifically when there is a short and clear causal chain assigning responsibility”³⁹. In addition, frames become very successful when they suggest simple and definite solutions and when they dovetail well within pre-existing storylines. This is so because press media always crammer for simple, precise and newsworthy stories, that can easily fit in the pages, that can easily be told, understood and remembered by the audience. This is especially true when confronted with complex conflict situations taking place in remotely located areas. Because of limited accessibility to conflict areas, policy makers and the general public may be starved of the information. In such a situation, simplified narratives play an important role for they emphasize key themes and the most important features of the conflict.

Bakke’s argument is supported by Autesserre’s study on the dominance of campaign narratives in DRC conflict, as well as the findings of Schomerus⁴⁰, who discusses the media, conflict framing and biased coverage of African conflicts, especially from the western media. She uses the story of her encounter with the LRA and Joseph Kony to argue that western media frames stories about African conflicts in a way that helps media to advance western stereotypes about Africa. She uses examples of the *BBC* and *The*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ BAKKE, M. K., “Acceptance and resistance to foreign ideas: transnational insurgents’ impact on the Chechen separatists”, Working paper, Department of Political Science, University College London, 2011, pp. 6-8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 667

⁴⁰ SCHOMERUS, M., ALLEN, T., VLASSENROOT, K., “Kony 2012 and the Prospects for Change”, *Foreign Affairs*, Published by USA Council on Foreign Affairs, March 13, 2012, Washington, DC.

Times which used interview material of Joseph Kony (conducted by herself) to confirm dominant stereotypes about the LRA and conflict in Africa – Kony as a mad man with messianic character – although the material (the interview itself) tried to do the opposite. The ‘Kony as a mad man’ narrative, according to Schomerus, became an accepted narrative about Kony and none of the media houses was willing to publish a story that would not align with this⁴¹. Instead of focusing on the real issues of war like militarization, suffering, justice and human rights, the two media houses shifted the story to make it about their journalists who were portrayed as being courageous for they had risked their lives into the wildness of Africa to meet a bloodthirsty warlord. When Heike Behrend was writing about Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Mobile Forces – the predecessor of the LRA – she noted how the movement “had already been created by the mass media”⁴².

Weick makes an interesting point in the debate on narratives, arguing that international organizations and foreign ministries rely on routines and stability, and try to avoid drastic reforms that may threaten institutional organization, culture and interest⁴³. This behavior favors narratives, since the type of changes advocated by narratives usually do not require a drastic change in practices and policies, but instead are recognizable and embedded in existing policy frameworks.

Other scholars like Kristof have argued that the benefits of simple narratives may outweigh the costs⁴⁴. Sometimes bad press in journalism is taken to be good press for it spreads awareness. For example, despite attracting a backlash from journalists, scholars and political commentators and despite the negative content, the Kony 2012 campaign has remained completely mesmerizing, attracting untapped audiences and resonating with people all over the world. This benefit of simple narratives may especially apply when dealing with complex situations like the LRA, helping a wide audience to get a (very) basic understanding of the conflict.

4. CASE STUDY: THE “KONY 2012” CAMPAIGN

Before the Kony 2012 campaign, Invisible Children had already organized a number of advocacy campaigns, in which film production, social actions and happenings in northern American major towns played a central role. It also played an important role in the advocacy campaign which led to

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴² BEHREND, H., *Alice Lakwena & the Holy Spirits. War in northern Uganda: 1985-1997*. Oxford, James Currey, 1999, p. 2.

⁴³ WEICK, E. K., *Sensemaking in Organizations*, New York, SAGE publishers, 1995, chapters 4 and 6.

⁴⁴ KRISTOF, D. N., “Kony’s Victims and the Kony 2012 Video”, New York, *New York Times*, March 9, 2012.

the signature of the LRA Disarmament Act (2010) by President Obama.⁴⁵ But its Kony 2012 campaign was of an unprecedented scale, reaching 100 million views within six days, and collecting USD 5 million in 48 hours, which makes it one of the fastest fundraising campaigns in history.⁴⁶ The aim of the campaign was to make Joseph Kony famous, and get him arrested (or killed) with the help of US military forces. To reach its objective, the campaign relies on particular narratives, which are rather problematic and harvested mixed responses.

4.1. Content of the “Kony 2012” video

The authors of this 30-minute documentary say their overall objective is to make Kony famous "not to celebrate him, but to raise support for his arrest and set a precedent for international justice"⁴⁷. In order to do so, the Kony 2012 campaign gives a brief overview of the conflict in northern Uganda, and highlights the atrocities of Joseph Kony, the man at the heart of the rebellion. Aiming to reach a large audience, it brings a simplified history of the conflict, which is explained through a conversation between the narrator (Mr. Jason Russell) and his 5 year old son. The narrator teaches his son and the wider audience how to distinguish the “bad” man Kony from his victims: the film features a number of images of victims of the mutilation attacks of the LRA in Uganda (images are shown of victims with broken or amputated limbs and others whose lips were cut off by the LRA); and the abductions of Kony and the LRA are highlighted. Viewers are also made to see children trekking at night from their home to Gulu town in northern Uganda for fear of being raped, maimed, abducted or killed by the LRA. Most of these images are from northern Uganda, from before 2006 (when the LRA left Uganda) – something which is (unfortunately) not contextualized clearly in the video. The video argues how Kony received the first ICC arrest warrants, as “the perversity of the crimes made him the first on the list”.⁴⁸

In order to solve this problem, it is argued, military intervention is needed: the Ugandan military needs to find Kony for him to be brought to justice. To achieve this goal, the Ugandan army is said to need the necessary technical know-how, which is to be provided by American troops, present in the area. For the latter to stay there, the public is required to put pressure on the American government. The campaign argues how people, especially the youth, should use social media networks like facebook, twitter and youtube

⁴⁵ PERROT, S., “The viral phenomenon Kony 2012: 100 million views for a non-event?”, *Politique Africaine*, no. 125, March 2012.

⁴⁶ MCCARTHY, T., “Kony 2012 gets 70m hits in a week”, London, *The Guardian*, March 9, 2012.

⁴⁷ PAINE, C., “What is KONY 2012? Inside the campaign that stopped the world”, Sydney, www.news.com.au, March 9, 2012.

⁴⁸ While the 5 arrest warrants for the LRA commanders indeed were the first to be released by the ICC, this was not related to the relative perversity of the crimes.

to spread information about atrocities committed by the LRA and also to donate towards this cause. It then calls for the “cover night” to cover cities in Europe and USA with posters of “#stop Kony”.⁴⁹

Through this action, Kony will be turned into a subject of “national interest” in Washington, thus attracting funding for 100 US military advisors who are already in Uganda on a mission to capture or kill Kony. Towards the end of the film, the movie presents images of ethnically diverse categories of students raising their fingers in celebration after President Obama signed into law the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009.⁵⁰

In the video, Ugandans play a minor role: only three Ugandans are given the forum throughout the film, two of whom are politicians and are briefly quoted, and one who was a victim of the LRA. This victim, called Jacob Acaye, was abducted when the rebels attacked his home in 2002 and killed his brother. He was interviewed by Jason Russell of Invisible Children but is not even given half of the time that is given to the filmmaker's five-year-old son, who (as mentioned above) plays a central role in the film.

The Ugandan military themselves do not feature in detail in the film, but are only presented as part of the ‘good force’ – the military complex which need to track down Kony, and which have been fighting hard to stop Kony for the past 25 years.

4.2. Key narratives advanced by “Kony 2012”

We argue that the Kony 2012 campaign advances two key narratives: (i) the conflict can be characterized as a battle between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forces, in which the bad – or even evil – character of the LRA is defined through its cruel actions on civilians, (ii) this situation and the ICC arrest warrant call for a military solution, with involvement of the US. For both narratives, we demonstrate the selectivity of the frame used, by embedding it in the broader social and political context of the problem. We show how the conflict is framed as a-political, which therefore requires a simply solution (military intervention) and at the same time reduces the population in the affected areas to passive victims.

4.2.1 *The ‘good’ versus the ‘bad’ forces in the LRA conflict*

The Kony 2012 campaign reduces the conflict between the LRA and the UPDF to a conflict between the ‘bad’ and the ‘good’ forces. The story-

⁴⁹ *Cover the Night* of April 20th was aimed at “turning awareness into action by supporting a new international effort that has concrete action steps”, www.invisiblechildren.com.

⁵⁰ Invisible Children also want the USA and the UN to “Provide the African Union effort with the logistical support needed to arrest Joseph Kony and his top commanders and protect civilians”, www.invisiblechildren.com.

lines that identify the LRA as the 'bad' force are the LRA abductions of innocent civilians, and its use of extreme violence. The video highlights that more than 30,000 children and women have been abducted since the war began in 1987, many to serve as sex slaves or child-soldiers forced to commit gruesome acts, sometimes involving atrocities against their own families. The campaign also tells about the approximately 2,600 people killed by the LRA in the four countries affected by the conflict; and shows the signs of brutal mutilations⁵¹. These storylines of course are true as such. The abductions are relatively well-documented, and other reports estimate the number of abductions to be even higher. For instance, Blattman and Annan estimate that a total of about 38,000 children have been recruited by the LRA as child soldiers⁵². Many others were abducted for a short period. According to a 2006 Survey of War-Affected Youth (SWAY), one out of six individuals interviewed said they had been abducted by the LRA at least for one day⁵³. There is also no doubt that the LRA has committed numerous atrocities in the conflict, as it has been documented by several reports on the LRA. For example, according to a 2010 Human Rights watch report, the LRA killed about 231 people and abducted 250 civilians and 80 children in the Makombo area of northeastern DRC.⁵⁴

By focusing on this narrative and these storylines, there is no doubt that the Kony 2012 campaign brings to the forefront much-needed attention for the issues of abduction and brutal violence committed by the LRA. Some young children have been physically and psychologically strongly harmed, and have often been turned into aggressive fighters⁵⁵. Research has indicated that children in northern Uganda have endured a disproportionate range of war-related experiences compared to their non-conscripted fellows, inflicting a pernicious impact on the well-being of formerly abducted children. These

⁵¹ www.invisiblechildren.com.

⁵² BLATTMAN, C., ANNAN, J., "Child combatants in northern Uganda: Reintegration myths and realities", in MUGGAH, R. (ed), *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Dealing with Fighters in the Aftermath of War*, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 103-126.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Of course, many more examples of these cruelties can be mentioned: in December 2009, LRA attacked Bangadi and Ngilima villages and mutilated six civilians by chopping off their lips with a razor. They later sent the victims back to their villages with a warning that whoever reports about their presence would face a similar punishment (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2010). In northern Uganda, where the LRA has operated for over two decades, traces of gruesome massacres still exist. One of such is the Barloonyo massacre of February 21, 2004 in which over 300 people in the Internally Displaced Camps (IDP) were gruesomely murdered by a group of LRA soldiers, in which the commander (Okot Odhiambo, who is indicted by the ICC) ordered to "kill every living thing" (JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION PROJECT, "Kill Every Living Thing: The Barloonyo Massacre", Field notes No. 9, Gulu, February 2009). In recent years, weak state presence and porous borders have further contributed to the regionalization of the conflict, in which atrocities have been committed on different sides of the border.

⁵⁵ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, "Abducted and abused: Renewed conflict in northern Uganda", New York, 2006.

experiences have affected their health development^{56:57}, and have brought solemn challenges to their reintegration^{58:59}. In addition, they face rejection from their community after they return from captivity.

While attention for these issues is welcome, their framing raises concern. As has been explained above, the 25 year-old conflicts is reduced to a battle between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forces, in which Kony and the LRA are portrayed as the ‘bad’ forces, and the wider military complex – the Ugandan forces, the American forces, and the public opinion supporting the latter – are presented as the ‘good’. This dichotomization is not new as it is a feature of almost all narratives on conflict in the world. As Ayesha Nibbe argues, “In the midst of complicated and muddied categories, it is necessary to construct a narrative that *reasserts clear boundaries and categories* between good and evil, right and wrong, blame and victim”⁶⁰. However, doing so creates a story in a vacuum in which political realities seem absent: the only things which are produced is violence (by the ‘bad’ forces), and related with this, victims. Using the familiar “good vs bad” storyline, the Kony 2012 narrative neglects a murky reality in which both sides have committed serious human rights abuses, and which are related with the political context in which this conflict takes place. To be clear: the LRA’s atrocities are incomparable in their scale and cruelty with those of the Ugandan government; yet, the Ugandan government itself has been involved in a number of cruelties and human rights violations and can also be said to have mismanaged the crisis – whether deliberately or not – with devastating consequences for the civilian population. One area of mismanagement relates to the displacement of the population.

By focusing on direct manifestations of violence, the campaign diverts attention from indirect manifestations of violence, which are totally absent from the film, but which have also had disastrous humanitarian consequences. The most manifest of these was forced displacement. From 1996 onwards, the population in the affected areas has been forcefully displaced by the Ugandan government into displacement camps. These camps were

⁵⁶ WESSELLS, G. M., *Child soldiers: From violence to protection*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006.

⁵⁷ WILLIAMS, R., “The psychosocial consequences for children of mass violence, terrorism and disasters” *International Review of Psychiatry*, vol. 19, 2007, pp. 263–277.

⁵⁸ FORBES ADAM, V. (ed), *Child soldiers. Global report 2008*, London, Coalition To Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008.

⁵⁹ However, some research also finds positive impacts on the victims. BLATTMAN, C., “From Violence to Voting: War and Political Participation in Uganda”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 103, No. 2, studied the impact of civil war on the victims and perpetrators in northern Uganda and concluded that former abductees participate more in community work, voting, personal growth and political activation.

⁶⁰ NIBBE, A. A., *The effects of a narrative: humanitarian aid and action in the northern Uganda conflict*, Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology in the Office of Graduate Studies of the University of California Davis, 2010, p. 73.

called 'protected villages', and were on one hand supposed to facilitate a better protection of the civilian population, as the UPDF was supposed to protect these camps; and on the other hand, ease military action against the rebel forces, by denying them civilian support and by making them more visible – making everyone outside of the camp a rebel suspect or rebel collaborator^{61,62}. At the height of the displacement exercise, about 1.5 million civilians were forced into Internally Displaced Persons' (IDPs) camps. However, the military objectives of these camps failed strongly: the camps were poorly protected, and in fact facilitated the attacks of the rebels. The forceful displacement happened at a moment when the UPDF was invading DR Congo, mobilizing most of the soldiers into Congo rather than to protect the camps. Devoid of protections and concentrated in one area, the civilians became an easy target for the rebels. Moreover, the LRA accused everyone in the camps of being a government collaborator, and therefore increased its attacks.⁶³ Conditions within the camps were gruesome: for example, on October 30, 2006 Uganda's independent newspaper, *The Daily Monitor*, published a report that showed that more people in northern Uganda were dying from the secondary effects of the war under the UPDF protected camps than from the war itself. Research has shown how excess mortality rates were a staggering 1000 people per week.⁶⁴ On top of this, UPDF soldiers have continuously been involved in human rights abuses in the IDP camps (and northern Ugandan in general), such as sexual abuses, violent attacks and lootings. In this context, the way in which the civilian population remembers the war is particularly illustrative, as is strikingly demonstrated by 1999 research of the NGO ACORD.⁶⁵ This research asked how, at the time, people had experienced the war since its outbreak, and particularly by whom, and in what way, they had been attacked. A focus group of 170 people indicated that killings of close relatives was the most frequent violent experience (37.9%), and how the majority of these cases were perpetrated by the rebels (62%). However, the remaining 38% of killings happened by government soldiers. Abduction was the second most frequent (36% of all cases), and almost happened exclusively by the rebels (96% – still 4% by the rebels). Beating or torture was the third most frequent, and happened mostly by the

⁶¹ For example, on certain occasions, the UPDF employed a dangerous strategy of torching homes of civilians who resisted the call to join IDPs camps and killing those perceived to be LRA collaborators (OTUNNU, O., "A path to Genocide in Northern Uganda", *Refugee*, Vol. 17, No. 3, August 1998, Toronto, York University, Centre for Refugee Studies).

⁶² DOLAN, C. G., *op. cit.*, pp. 50-57: p. 38.

⁶³ BRANCH, A., *Displacing human rights: war and intervention in northern Uganda*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 128-130.

⁶⁴ IRIN, "1,000 displaced die every week in war-torn North", UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, 29 August 2005, cited in BRANCH, A., "Against Humanitarian Impunity: Rethinking Responsibility for Displacement and Disaster in northern Uganda", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2008, pp. 151-173.

⁶⁵ DOLAN, C. G., *op. cit.*, p. 50.

rebels (61.5%), but again with a significant amount of government soldiers abuses (38.5%). In a different focus group on the damage of personal property, a 50:50 division emerged, in which acts such as burning, looting or confiscation happened in equal amount by rebels and government forces..⁶⁶ This research shows that, being forced to live in IDP camps, the population was exposed to a range of abuses. The situation in the camps has been labeled “enforced domination”⁶⁷ or “social torture”⁶⁸, and a number of Acholi and political commentators have even accused the government of genocide on the Acholi. For example, on January 8, 2006 *The Daily Monitor* article “Northern Uganda: Profile of genocide” quoted former UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict Olara Otunnu accusing the government of Uganda of “methodical and comprehensive genocide”. Citing the increasing number of death in the UPDF protected camps, Mr Otunnu argued that the Acholi society was “being systematically destroyed-- physically, culturally, emotionally, socially, and economically -- in full view of the international community”.⁶⁹ Some analysts have noted that the government of Uganda should be held liable for the crimes witnessed throughout the conflict, and the suffering which it has caused⁷⁰.

The fight against the LRA did not only lead to abuses by government forces within Uganda, but also outside of Uganda. With regards to Sudan (where the UPDF has been operating since the late 1990s), Schomerus argues that the UPDF “Instead of conducting a successful operation against Uganda’s most persistent rebels (...) the UPDF conducted a campaign of abuse against Sudanese civilians”⁷¹. UPDF soldiers were allegedly involved in killing civilians. There were widespread suspicions that UPDF was dressing up as LRA to ambush and rob people and were involved in a number of businesses, such as illegal logging.⁷² Similar abuses took place in other places. A recent report on the activities of the UPDF in CAR says that

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50-57.

⁶⁷ FINNSTROM, S., *Living with bad surroundings: war and existential uncertainty in Acholiland, northern Uganda*, Uppsala University, 2003, p. 197.

⁶⁸ DOLAN, C. G., *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ Another indicator of this social destruction is for example the level of HIV infections: in 1995 HIV infections was at 30% in the IDP camps of Kitgum district compared to the national average of 5%. During the same period, the medical superintendent of Gulu also confirmed that 27% of children who were brought to the hospital from IDP camps were HIV positive, while 40% of pregnant women from IDP camps who attended Lacor Hospital for prenatal treatment had tested HIV-positive (*Daily Monitor*, January 8, 2006).

⁷⁰ KEATING, J., “Joseph Kony is not in Uganda (and other complicated things)”, Washington D.C., *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2012, http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/07/guest_post_joseph_kony_is_not_in_uganda_and_other_complicated_things.

⁷¹ SCHOMERUS, M., “They forget what they came for: Uganda’s army in Sudan”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2012, p. 124.

⁷² SCHOMERUS, M., “The Lord’s Resistance Army in Sudan: A History and Overview”, Working Paper 8, Human Security Baseline Assessment, Geneva, The Small Arms Survey, 2007.

the UPDF “has allowed a culture of impunity”, was involved in human rights abuses including sexual violence and in “illicit activities in CAR, including illegal logging, looting of mineral resources and general trading activities”⁷³. Similar accusations have been made for the anti-LRA activities of the UPDF in Congo, in which particularly the Congolese army has accused the UPDF of benefiting from the violence⁷⁴, something which resonates Uganda’s previous engagement in Congo, and its looting of the mineral wealth.⁷⁵ As a result, the DRC currently no longer allows Ugandan forces on its territory, even not for fighting the LRA.

Lastly, while the conflict with the LRA was used by the Ugandan military to justify a strong increase of their budget, large parts of the defense budget have been misused. Corruption was rampant in the 1990s, when the wages for ‘ghost soldiers’ were pocketed by army officers. It was estimated that by 2003 a staggering one- to two-thirds of the army were ghost soldiers, with an annual price tag of USD 40 million per year.⁷⁶ There also were a range of corruption scandals in the procurement of military infrastructure. Thus, through these rent-seeking activities, the security threat was creating benefits to a group of people and hence, incentives for a continuation of the insecurity.

In sum, the campaign neglects the broader political context in which the conflict takes place, and the role of the Ugandan government in the conflict. Whereas most civilians in northern Uganda would label the LRA as “bad” – in line with the Kony 2012 campaign – it is less likely that they would unanimously label the Ugandan government as “good”.

4.2.2 A military solution to LRA insurgency

This campaign comes after numerous failed operations by the militaries of Uganda, DRC, South Sudan and CAR to capture or kill the LRA leader. The Kony 2012 campaign calls for strengthening the USA military role in the war against the LRA: as outlined above, it is argued how the Ugandan forces can only succeed to find Kony by relying on American military support. The campaign justifies the need for the USA military assistance by pointing out that Kony and his five commanders were indicted by the ICC in 2005 for crimes against humanity and war crimes. According to this campaign, stopping Kony requires a concerted international effort (Invisible Children). Apart from the military intervention, the campaign calls upon

⁷³ CAKAJ, L., *The Lord’s Resistance Army in the Central African Republic*, Brooklyn, SSR, Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, December 2011, p. 10.

⁷⁴ SCHOMERUS, M., “They forget ...”, *op. cit.*; CAKAJ, L., *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ VLASSENROOT, K., PERROT, S., CUVELIER, J., “Doing business out of war. An analysis of the UPDF’s presence in the Democratic Republic of Congo”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p. 2-21.

⁷⁶ MWENDA, A., “Uganda’s politics of foreign aid and violent conflict: the political uses of the LRA rebellion”, in ALLEN, T., VLASSENROOT, K. (Eds), *op. cit.*, p. 52.

“governments around the world to take part in a comprehensive approach to end the LRA threat and to support regional governments in the effort to protect civilians and apprehend LRA leadership. This approach should include four main pillars “(1) the protection of civilians, (2) the apprehension of LRA leadership, (3) the facilitation of the peaceful surrender of LRA combatants and (4) support to rehabilitation efforts for communities and individuals affected by the LRA” (www.invisiblechildren.com)⁷⁷.

Scholars, political commentators and policy makers have remained deeply divided on what exactly is the appropriate solution to the LRA crisis. Those who argue in favor of a military approach base their argument on the following two observations: (1) Kony is a military bandit with no clear political objectives other than killing innocent civilians and causing misery and suffering, and one cannot engage in negotiations with a group whose motivations for the war are ambiguous; (2) in the past, the LRA has never been committed to any sort of a peaceful process, and instead has made use of peace talks to re-group, re-arm and recruit⁷⁸. For instance, President Museveni often uses the failure of the Juba peace talks to argue that the LRA cannot be trusted to engage in meaningful negotiations. To him, the only way to decimate the LRA from the region and end the conflict is through employing the doctrine of collective security, i.e. the idea that states in the region would agree to the principle that the security of one state should be a concern of all, thereby developing a will to contribute financial, human and material resources to respond to the threats to peace. It is for this reason that a coalition of forces comprising of the military units from Uganda, DRC, CAR and South Sudan has been formed to attack and decimate the LRA.⁷⁹

However, the reasons for opposing peaceful resolution mechanisms have also been criticized. First, the earlier Bigombe peace talks failed because it was Museveni, not the LRA who called them off without giving any convincing reason for his decision. In Bigombe’s own words, the president acted under the “influence of spoilers”⁸⁰. Second, whereas it is true that the LRA refused to sign the deal made at the Juba peace negotiations, the pro-military approach group ignores other key elements behind the failure of the Juba peace process, such as the ICC arrest warrants, the lack of a credible negotiator, and the difficult communication between the political and military wing of the LRA⁸¹.

Moreover, the military option poses a danger of aggravating the problem it sets out to solve. Our argument is threefold. First, there is no

⁷⁷ www.invisiblechildren.com, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ ARNOLD, J., “Why ‘Kony 2012’ Creates Effective Social Change”, Washington, DC, March 3rd 2012.

⁷⁹ Although this idea has been criticized for acting only as a vehicle for the UPDF’s interests.

⁸⁰ MICHAUD, H., “I needed to talk to Kony”, Radio Netherlands worldwide, Cape Town, South Africa, March 12, 2010.

⁸¹ HENDRICKSON, D., TUMUTEGYEREIZE, K., *op. cit.*

guarantee that this military strategy will be successful. For more than two decades, the LRA has avoided direct confrontation with UPDF, instead relying on guerrilla warfare tactics, including surprise attacks⁸². Secondly, previous high-profile US-supported military operations against the LRA like the “Operation Lightning Thunder” and “Iron Fist” failed in their efforts to end the conflict. Instead, they have led to LRA reprisals killing thousands of people in Uganda, CAR and DRC. Civilian protection should therefore be at the heart of any effort to intervene in the conflict: any military action against the LRA without providing sufficient protection for the civilian population increases the risk of attacks on this population – as the long history of retaliation-attacks by the LRA shows. Moreover, a military strike against LRA cannot distinguish between combatants and non-combatants and puts at risk innocent lives. Third, as we have shown above, the military option, and particularly the presence of the UPDF on foreign territory, has consistently led to a number of abuses, such as human rights violations or turning war into a profitable enterprise. Given this history of abuses, a further militarization of the region is inherently dangerous.

4.3. Mixed responses to “Kony 2012”

As Autessere demonstrates, dominant narratives are always contested, often by the marginalized voices, the same voices whose plight they intend to highlight⁸³. As a result, competing narratives are likely to emerge. The Kony 2012 campaign received its share of contestation. Below, we describe the reactions from African(ist) scholars, the Ugandan government, the people from the affected areas and Invisible Children.

4.3.1 *African(ist) scholars*

Policy makers, scholars, civil society leaders, journalists who have had some engagement in northern Uganda, have read or studied the conflict and therefore are well informed about its dynamics have criticized the campaign. A frequent criticism was that the campaign was the reflection of a colonial mentality, or what Teju Cole called the “white industrial savior complex”⁸⁴, in which Africans are portrayed as backward people who should be saved from their barbaric native culture through colonialism, or in this case by American military forces, and by making Kony famous among a western audience – mainly American teenagers. A similar case often cited was that of General J. C. Smuts, who infamously stated that Africa “has largely remained a child type, with a child psychology and outlook. A child-

⁸² TILLON, N., “Beyond Kony 2012”, London, Conciliation Resources, April 14, 2012.

⁸³ AUTESSERRE, S., *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ COLE, T., “The white savior industrial complex”, *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012.

like human cannot be a bad human...⁸⁵. While trying to investigate western cognitive biases towards Africa, Mwenda used the argument put forth by one of the colonial administrators, Albert Schweitzer, who argued in favour of using force to promote peace and cohesion in Africa. To him, an African is like “a child and with children, nothing can be done without authority”.

The campaign is therefore seen as trying to display the same old colonial mentality which portrays Africa as incapable of solving their own problems, conveniently ignoring the peaceful efforts by Africans to end the conflict⁸⁶. For example, the campaign neglects how (as mentioned above) a number of local civil society initiatives have been involved extensively in efforts for a peaceful resolutions. Kersten debunked what he called the “myths” propagated by Kony 2012; he argues that “it is hard to respect any documentary on northern Uganda where a five year-old white boy features more prominently than any northern Ugandan victim or survivor”⁸⁷. Fierce criticism also emerged on the good/bad narrative, and the strong simplification of the conflict (focusing on one party of the conflict), arguing instead for a complete representation of the conflict.^{88,89}

4.3.2 *The Ugandan government*

Naturally, the good/bad and militarization narrative was not being contested by the Ugandan government: for example, appearing on CNN’s Christiane Amanpour show, President Yoweri Museveni reasoned that Kony would have been captured long ago by the Ugandan troops, were it not for lack of military capacity on the side of the Ugandan government. He said the 100 USA troops who were deployed in the area to offer technical help will assist regional forces by using their technology to provide information, advice, and assistance to the militaries of Uganda, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the DRC who are involved in the hunt for Kony.

As highlighted above, the video largely relies on images from the ‘Ugandan phase’ of the conflict, herein creating the impression that the LRA still is in Uganda. This could not count on support of the Ugandan government. Uganda’s Prime Minister, Amama Mbabazi, took to twitter and YouTube to correct what he called a “wrong impression” created by the video. The Kony video, Mr Mbabazi said, though viewed by “tens of mil-

⁸⁵ MWENDA, A., “Inside the West’s double standards Part I”, Kampala, March 17, 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201203170225.html>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ KERSTEN, M., “Taking ‘Kony 2012’ Down A Notch”, Kampala, March 7, 2012.

⁸⁸ MAMDANI, M., “What Jason Did Not Tell Gavin and His Army of Invisible Children: the Downside of the Kony 2012 Video”, Kampala, March 12, 2012; OKOT BITEK, J., “Myth, storytelling and the wasted potential of Kony 2012”, makingsenseofkony.org, May 16, 2012.

⁸⁹ BRANCH, A., “Dangerous ignorance: The hysteria of Kony 2012”, Kampala, May 12, 2012; SCHOMERUS, M., “Chasing the Kony story”, in TIM, A., VLASSENROOT, K., *op. cit.*, p. 140.

lions of people, was an inaccurate portrayal of the present day Uganda”⁹⁰. Mr. Mbabazi said that even prior to the web emergence of the Kony 2012 campaign, “the Uganda government and the regional forces with the help of the African Union and the USA, had formed a joint force that is trying to trace Kony and his LRA group”. He explained that this joint force has made the Uganda government optimistic that they will catch Kony. Also, President Museveni said (in the CNN interview mentioned above) that although he had not watched the video, he was reliably informed that it had some inaccuracies and advised Invisible Children to correct the wrong impressions they had created in the international domain. “The inaccuracies were that Kony is still in Uganda. Kony was chased from Uganda by us about seven years ago and his remnants are in Congo and Sudan”⁹¹.

4.3.3 *The people from the affected areas*

The Kony 2012 campaign was strongly criticized by local civil society organizations. For example, a press release from civil society organizations in northeastern Congo argued strongly against military intervention, for “without an efficient army and state presence, it is not possible to guarantee people’s protection, border management and long-term stability in the region”⁹². Instead, it asked to “put political pressure on the governments affected by the conflict, not only on western governments”, to engage with local organisations, to invest in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes, and most importantly, that “Talking is not a crime”, in that a constructive dialogue between local and regional actors involved is necessary⁹³. The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, who – as described above – were very active in the search for a peaceful solution to the conflict in northern Uganda, reacted to the Kony 2012 with a letter, in which they wrote that they “watched the Video with a hope of finding peaceful solution to the conflict but only to find sensational messages. (...) It misrepresents the current situation on the ground and is full of over simplified justifications.” A military solution will only lead to intensified violence of the LRA. Therefore, instead of looking for a military solution, the campaign should push for a “revival of the peace talks that stalled in Juba”. Lastly, Invisible Children is called an “instrument for recent US deployment” in the region, and therefore the “Community feels the video is a gateway for selfish interest but not to stop the war” (Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative 2012). In a press conference, Bishop Odama said the “video’s intention is to ignite

⁹⁰ “Ugandan PM: Kony 2012 video gives false impression”, London, *Daily Telegraph*, March 18, 2012.

⁹¹ “Uganda President hasn’t seen #Kony 2012”, www.cnn.com, April 18, 2012.

⁹² TILLON, N., SUGULE KANGOYANGALA, E., “Beyond Kony 2012, refocusing on civilian protection”, unpublished paper, 2012.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

anger among the population and to cause violence. He described the video as catastrophic and urged the Invisible Children organization to “rethink its position as a charity organization or face widespread ridicule”⁹⁴.

Screenings of the video in northern Uganda has led to major problems: on each of the two screenings violent protest broke out, in which stones were thrown at the organisers – in this process, one person died and others were injured during the screening in Gulu.⁹⁵ “As soon as they saw the clip saying that people should make Kony famous, people got very upset and started to react”, Mr Victor Oche the Director of African Youth Network was quoted by the UK’s *Telegraph* newspaper as saying. “People were asking why they were showing white children in America and not telling the truth about the situation of the local people in the area.”⁹⁶ Dr. Beatrice Mpora, director of Kairos, a community health organization in Gulu, in northern Uganda said most of the victims were opposed to the idea of making a ruthless person like Kony famous. She explains that “making Kony ‘famous’ could make him stronger and that US troops could make him scared, and force him to abduct more children, or go on the offensive.”⁹⁷

Some of the victims were very critical of the campaign. According to Uganda’s *Daily Monitor* newspaper, one victim Margaret Aciro, “whose picture appears in the Kony 2012 video showing her lips, nose and ears mutilated, criticized the documentary, saying it is aimed at making money using victims of the northern insurgency”⁹⁸. Another victim Ms. Aciro, 35, was abducted by rebels in 2003 and is among thousands of people who came to watch the filming of Kony in Gulu town. She left before the filming ended, claiming that she was disappointed: “I watched the Kony 2012 video but I decided to return home before the second one because I was dissatisfied with its content. I became sad when I saw my photo in the video. I knew they were using it to profit.”⁹⁹

Not everyone was against the video. Although Norbert Mao – northern Uganda’s most important (opposition) politician, and active in the peace negotiations since around 2003 – initially criticized the video for not paying attention to the government abuses. But he later showed his support to the video, seeing it as a “positive development” because “western advocacy matters and can make a difference”. By bringing attention to the issue, he argues, a number of issues can be addressed, for instance the need for the ICC to also investigate the Ugandan government¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁴ LAWINO, S., “Reactions to Kony 2012 in Gulu”, Makingsenseofkony.org, 22 April 2012.

⁹⁵ “Kony 2012 screening in Gulu leaves one dead and many injured”, *Acholi Times*, April 16, 2012.

⁹⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, “Ugandan PM: Kony 2012 video gives false impression”, March 18, 2012. Available: www.telegraph.co.uk.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ LAWINO, S., *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ KEATING, J., *op. cit.*, p. 2.

In general, the good/bad narrative has been criticized by people on the ground who have lived through a very different experience. The militarization narrative has been criticized by a number of civil society actors. What both of these narratives have in common is that they frame the local population as passive victims. This is seen as offensive by African(ist) scholars, but also by the local population, which strongly feels 'used' by this discourse: the image of American youth coming to their rescue is not only found to be insulting, it also raises suspicion on the financial motives of the organization – something which was further fuelled by the debate on how Invisible Children spends its resources¹⁰¹.

4.3.4 *Invisible Children*

Faced with strong backlash, Invisible Children decided to release a much more detailed video called "Kony 2012: Part II". In this video, the group mainly addressed the framing of the narratives used: instead of largely neglecting local voices and portraying them as victims, a range of local actors (such as Congolese and Ugandan victims or politicians) were given a much more prominent role. The second video did however not change the two main narratives: it still relied on a strong distinction between the good and bad forces, and still advocated for military intervention as the only solution¹⁰². For example, in this second video, ICC chief prosecutor Moreno Ocampo claims that the LRA has only engaged in peace talks to regroup, remobilize and re-arm itself. This statement signals that the ICC has ruled out the option of peace talks and instead reached a conclusion that military intervention is the only option on the table, which raises questions about the impartiality of the ICC to administer justice to all parties in conflict¹⁰³.

5. CONCLUSION

In the contemporary internet age, advocacy groups and policy makers use simplified narratives to draw attention. The simplified campaign narratives of Kony 2012 combined with the clever use of social media has enabled Invisible Children to put the conflict in northern Uganda and eastern DRC on the international agenda. However, for someone without any idea about the LRA conflict, it would be very difficult to grasp the nature of the conflict by merely watching the Kony 2012 video. Instead such a person would be misinformed in a number of ways. First, the film gives the impression that the LRA is still a threat in northern Uganda and only gives a by-

¹⁰¹ ANDERSON, N., "Kony 2012: Making the Invisible Visible", demandnothing.org, March 7, 2012.

¹⁰² The second video was much less watched: on June 22, 2012; it had been watched 2,281,601 times on youtube – which of course still is a large number.

¹⁰³ BRANCH, A., *op. cit.*, published online at Aljazeera.net/English/opinion.

the-way mentioning of its operations in the CAR and DRC. Second, it entirely blames the LRA for the atrocities in the north while ignoring those committed by the Ugandan military. Third, it ignores past efforts for a peaceful solution. Alongside the misinformation and important omissions, the campaign features two key narratives: the conflict is reduced to a conflict between the 'good' and 'bad' forces, and in order to solve this, military intervention is needed, in which American troops play a crucial role.

Leaving out pieces of the puzzle and painting a simplistic view is not without consequences. It carries the danger for simplified solutions, which would ill-fit the complexity of the problem. Invisible children wanted to make its campaign as accessible as possible, but in doing so neglected various aspects. As Ayesha Nibbe argued with regards to the activities of Invisible Children in northern Uganda: "This story is instead about favoring *marketability* over politics – that is, telling a story based on the construction of clear, logical, digestible categories versus an organic, uncontrollable, multifaceted, multifocal, and complex reality."¹⁰⁴ Of course, what we are presenting here is as much a narrative as the one put forward by Kony 2012, but by framing it more clearly within the political and social context of the conflict, and by including all of the actors involved, we hope to have presented a more complete presentation of the conflict.

First, we have shown how the strict distinction between good and bad is difficult to make. While the LRA is involved in extreme violence and atrocities, the civilian population has also suffered from the anti-LRA activities of the government: forced displacement, human rights abuses, extralegal commercial activities and corruption were some of the abuses of the Ugandan government in the conflict. Second, the call for a military solution is problematic on several levels: it does not take into account measures for civilian protection; it neglects the importance of peace negotiations; and it relies on a strong 'white man's burden' framing of the facts, in which it neglects the efforts of local organizations in searching a peaceful resolution to the conflict (such as the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative).

The speed in which the Kony 2012 campaign spread through the internet, and the attention it raised, quickly made it a dominant narrative worldwide. In doing so, almost as quickly a counter-narrative emerged, in which actors from the affected areas were given a voice, something which without this campaign would not have happened. In this way, a debate on the conflict emerged, which can be considered a positive effect for all actors concerned. In the contemporary digital age, the power of social media should not be underestimated. Though social media may come with destructive effects, especially as regards facts about of understanding of African conflict and humanitarian intervention, it remains the most accessible tool of our generation to rely on when sending, sharing or texting information. It can

¹⁰⁴ NIBBE, A., *op. cit.*, p. 273.

create a space for a constructive dialogue, allowing different categories of people (the youth, policy makers, journalists and civil leaders) to interact. Through this process, the new media breaks communication barriers and enables a convergence of values for peace and justice between the local people and the international community.

Thus, the Kony 2012 campaign presents both challenges and opportunities for policy makers who are working to find solutions to armed conflicts in Africa and scholars studying the dynamic nature of African conflicts. For policy makers it highlights the opportunity to embrace the use of social media to spread information about conflict in Africa but also the challenge of drawing that delicate balance between internet sensationalism and factual campaigns. For scholars it is a challenge to understand how simple narratives continue to drive our understanding of African conflict, and how they can be made comprehensive enough to embrace all the facts on the ground.

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