

Morgan Kronberger
2nd year Ph.D. student, Political Science

The Invisible Children Movement:
The Domestic and International Impact of a Western NGO

The Research Project

For this project, I will be taking a critical yet sympathetic look at a Western organization, the Invisible Children's movement. The movement began when three young filmmakers traveled to Uganda and documented the lives of child soldiers who were being forcibly drawn into the Lord's Resistance Army. In response to what they saw, the three men began to preview their documentary across the U.S. and developed an organization to defend Uganda's oppressed children. Situated within the broader context of concern over youth in conflict and post-conflict situations, this project seeks to develop a better understanding of the relationship between a Western organization and the third-world country it aims to help.

The project will take the form of a critical ethnography. While historically used to examine a distant "other" and explain their culture, ethnography is increasingly gaining acceptance as an appropriate tool and method to better understand groups within one's own society. Through participant-observation and in-depth interviewing, I hope to gain a deeper knowledge of how Western constructs inevitably influence our view of peace processes and grassroots peacebuilding. The main questions I hope to answer are: first, whether or not the Invisible Children movement has overcome the advancement of the image of Ugandan/African children as a helpless "other" and second, whether significant and lasting positive social change can come from the outside.

My research will proceed in several phases, each contributing to a deeper awareness of the organization and its either positive or negative impact in the peacebuilding process. I have already spoken with the staff, who are more than willing to accommodate any research I would like to conduct. First, I will analyze the inner workings of the organization itself, based in San Diego. How is Invisible Children organized? What race and gender are the board members and staff? What educational levels have staff members attained? Additionally, how are they viewed within the Ugandan communities they are helping? Who are they connected with in Uganda, and with whom do they no longer maintain ties? What are the implications of these questions for how the organization is being run and how the organization views itself? The purpose of this section is to uncover the degree to which the Invisible Children movement advances inherently Western constructs of culture and peacebuilding, and how this necessarily colors their mission, goals, and tactics. Self-reflexivity is especially important in peacebuilding, so as not to perpetuate a negative image of the helpless "other."

In the second phase of my research, I will examine the movement within high schools. Due to the popularity of the documentary, many students across the U.S. have formed local chapters of the organization at high schools. However, critically examining the impact that this has had, I question whether viewing the documentary projects or solidifies a view of the children as "others." Does the film perpetuate the idea that Africans cannot help themselves, and that Western influence is both necessary and welcome? To answer these questions, I will attend the school viewings of the film throughout the fall quarter, and will administer surveys to gauge the overall impact that

the film had on the students—what was their reaction to the movie? Did the movie change or solidify Western impressions of Africa, and African youths? What did the students feel compelled to do after they had viewed the documentary? The purpose of this part of my research is to understand how the movie has been perceived by youth, and whether this may in effect promote the idea of a “civilizing mission” in destitute Uganda.

Purpose

In the final analysis, the Invisible Children’s movement has significantly contributed to publicizing the problem of children soldiers and the necessity of global awareness and action. However, if the organization’s conceptions of peace and of third world countries are inherently based upon Western cultural constructs, how great is its ability to enact lasting social change in a non-Western context? Do members of the Invisible Children movement understand their role in the formulation of the other? Does this have implications for the social order in which we ourselves are engaged? The overall purpose of these questions and of my research project is to better understand whether or not these issues are indicative of broader issues with NGOs. How do Western organizations best enact change in societies emerging from conflict? The lessons learned from this project may provide significant insights into both the positive and negative impacts that citizens can have in their peacebuilding efforts.

Relevance to the Center’s Mission

The mission of the Center is to help citizens seek realistic ways to improve human conditions locally and globally, with a specific goal of studying citizen peacebuilding initiatives at home and around the world to determine the best practices currently in place. My research project works directly towards the goal of studying peace initiatives at home, as I will attempt to better understand both the positive and negative impact that a Western-based organization can have in a non-Western society that is emerging from conflict. By analyzing the underlying assumptions and the inner workings of the Invisible Children movement, and by developing a better understanding of its impact on youth in the U.S., I hope to promote a stronger knowledge of the most effective ways that citizens can engage in the peacebuilding process. While I am sympathetic with the movement’s goals and aims, and realize that it has significantly contributed to a better understanding of citizen efforts toward building peace, we must be willing to critically examine the notion of Western influence in conflict zones around the world.