# WORLD PEACE FOUNDATION

## OVERVIEW

International (principally American) campaigns that advocate policies and actions in conflicts around the world have gained profile and impact in the last decade, most notably through new models that value mass mobilization of the American public, celebrity involvement, and marketing campaigns. The "advocacy in conflict" seminar addressed a discernible divergence between the goals, methods and impacts of these campaigns, and the requirements for resolving the political conflicts in the countries concerned and empowering the affected people. The recent case that has drawn most controversy is the *KONY2012* video by the group Invisible Children, which sparked deep disquiet among Ugandans and specialists in the region. The *KONY2012* case crystallized the deepening concern among humanitarians, human rights organizations and conflict resolution specialists over a series of campaigns in Africa and elsewhere.

Rather than "speaking truth to power" such campaigns too often speak half-truths on behalf of power.

The seminar sought to extend the discussion of contemporary activism. It brought together analysis of the African cases most often under the spotlight—especially Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), but also with discussions of Sudan and South Sudan—with cases less often analyzed, namely Burma/Myanmar and Gaza. The seminar also aimed to explore how campaigns for international responses interlocked with structures of power and narratives of change.

A theme that recurred throughout the seminar was the distinction between two kinds of activism: one, principled solidarity with the people affected, pursuing solutions that they themselves define; and two, advocacy for a U.S. (or other western nation) policy response, that frequently defines success in terms of adopting a policy, rather than resolving the situation in the country concerned.

**Among the cases discussed were:**

- Sudan, with special attention to the conflict and atrocities in the Nuba Mountains in 1990s, and reference to Darfur and the Sudan-South Sudan conflicts;
- Uganda and the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA);
- Democratic Republic of the Congo, notably the issue of "conflict minerals";
- Burma/Myanmar, analyzing the democracy movement, the suppression of ethnic minorities and abuses associated with those wars and how the campaign focus has shifted since Burma's rapprochement with the U.S.;
- The parallel and polarized advocacies associated with conflict and violence in the Gaza Strip.

**The participants in the seminar agreed that we face a collective challenge: to reclaim activism as solidarity with conflict-affected populations, who should establish the agenda and goals and lead action. This task is an ethical, intellectual and policy agenda. Among the questions that emerged are the following:**

- The agency, knowledge, and accountability of international versus local actors;
- Models and precedents: how lessons are learned and adapted across cases;
- Strategies and goals adopted by advocacy groups as they define the conflict and identify their constituencies and audiences;
- Distinctions between campaigns concerned with structural or cross-cutting issues, and those focused on particular crises;
- Constraints on goals, strategies, and target audiences arising from the leadership and financing of these campaigns, and the political orientation of their membership;
- The professional incentives that arise, for policymakers and scholars, from a well-resourced and publicly valued form of activism in western countries;
- The strengths and weaknesses of human rights as a framework for demanding political change;
- The intolerance of criticism and resistance to debate that too often arises from a narrative of human rights and ethical absolutes.

# Reclaiming "Activism"

The great majority of political activists around the world pursue causes that directly affect their interests and rights. Often they enlist others, who, motivated by solidarity and outrage, are ready to contribute effort and sacrifice, bringing professional skills and wider connections to assist the cause. Political activism overlaps with philanthropy insofar as both are motivated by compassion and humanity. But while charity is a *depoliticizing* activity, stripping political agency away from its beneficiaries, political activism should be an exercise in the *political empowerment* of subjects. The greater the distance between the activist and the concerned community, and the greater the discrepancy in power and profile between the two, the more important it is for the activist to ensure that he or she is truly supportive of the agenda of the concerned

people and accountable to them.

Paradigmatic examples of activism in support of faraway people deprived of their rights were the worldwide anti-colonial and anti-Apartheid movements. The international movement against the Vietnam War was not primarily a liberal human rights movement: rather it was a challenge to U.S. global power ("neo-imperialism") and militarism, and in support of the right of the Vietnamese to determine their own political future. In the U.S., the leaders of the domestic civil rights movements were active in support of their African counterparts, with bonds of solidarity forged by the similarities of their plights and struggles.

A curiosity of the last decade of western advocacy on conflicts is that a wholly different relationship has arisen between the "activist" and the affected community. Led by groups such as the Enough Project, "activism" has been redesigned as an entirely domestic endeavor: changing policies in western capitals by mobilizing constituencies around celebrities and publicity. Success is measured by the extent to which advocates can convince a domestic population that simple actions they can take will produce fundamental change in distant conflict-ridden places. Through highly-produced multimedia products, celebrity spokespersons, and simplified narratives, a new set of practices is developing. Invariably, the answers these campaigns propose are framed as *apolitical*: clothed in ethical absolutes, impervious to critique, and challenging to the activist's own government only to the extent that it is called upon to do more. The

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message is one of empowerment—but the empowerment of a *domestic* constituency, consisting of people *not* affected by conflict. The *KONY2012* video skillfully makes its viewers believe that someone tweeting @justinbieber is as courageous and significant as the protesters that brought down the dictatorship in Tunisia.

Two divergent examples help illustrate the contrast between a classic model of activism in support of local initiative, and "designer activism" that promotes a product in a western mediatized marketplace.

*The Nuba of Sudan: Local script, foreign solidarity*

In 1992-93, the Sudanese government, at the height of its Islamist revolution, launched an offensive against the peoples of the Nuba Mountains, people who follow diverse cultures and faiths who are located within northern Sudan. The attacks provide an extreme example of asymmetry in capacity—a government army and air force pitted against a poor, isolated community. It aimed not only at defeating the rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) but also at relocating the Nuba population from its homeland and forcibly transforming their society and culture. Yet the Nuba managed an extraordinary feat of self-organization and community cohesion. They—coupled with dissent within the Sudanese government and wider society—successfully resisted the onslaught and thereby rescued their own people. This had the positive outcome of strengthening the Nuba people's own democratic practices. Only a handful of outsiders were aware of the circumstances at the time, and they focused their engagement around solidarity with the Nuba-led movement. Central to their activism was self-effacement: although the project

of gaining access to the Nuba Mountains and providing support involved infinitely more dangers than the choreographed field visits of designer activists today, the focus of the campaign was entirely on what the Nuba people were doing for themselves, not on the heroic drama of an ostensible international rescue.

Subsequent international engagement with the Nuba issue led to a number of unfortunate consequences: the involvement of Christian evangelists contributed to religious polarization, and the subsuming of the Nuba conflict into a north-south framework for resolving Sudan's civil war led to an unsatisfactory peace agreement, that predictably unraveled in 2011 when South Sudan seceded, leaving the Nuba isolated within northern Sudan.

*KONY2012: Foreign script, local alienation*

On March 5, 2012, Invisible Children (IC) released their video, *KONY2012*, designed to make the leader of the LRA Joseph Kony "famous" among youth in the United States, thereby supporting U.S. military action in Uganda, leading to the arrest of Kony, and his trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC). In addition to the contorted logic of this plan, the video was not accurate, grossly simplified the situation today in Uganda, asked the U.S. government to do what it was already doing (deploy military advisers), didn't take up the question of the U.S.'s refusal to join the ICC, and, most significantly, ignored the hard work Ugandans had been engaged in for years which had resulted in Kony being removed from Uganda so that peace could return, and a process of reconstruction and reconciliation. Instead, the video opted to tell young Americans that change was easy, and could be effected by them. The editing of the video was superb but transmitted a wholly misleading message that was possible only because of the remoteness of the people of northern Uganda, who were unable to answer back. The staff of IC knew that they were misleading their viewers.

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The video exceeded 100 million hits in one week—the fastest pace for an online video to reach this mark—vastly surpassing IC's expectations for their campaign. Instead of reducing the LRA to its true size and significance—a band of a few hundred marauders in a remote forest—IC elevated the mystique of its leader in a way that he could rarely have dreamed. While some people in the region believed that because the campaign had reached the White House, President Barack Obama was now certain to take decisive action to solve the problem, many Ugandans were horrified and there were even demonstrations against *KONY2012* and its agenda.

Activism defined as solidarity with demands articulated by a conflict-affected population is an honorable commitment. But another term is needed to describe publicity-based awareness campaigns to give American youth a transient and likely illusory sense of empowerment.

# Situating the Key Actors

International advocacy plays an important role in responses to conflicts across the world. People immediately affected by conflict are rarely able to influence power centers such as Washington DC, where policies and decisions can have a profound impact on their future. These people are not always in a position to imagine long-term strategies nor do they necessarily have a platform that enables their insights to be taken seriously. But the key question is how the relationship between international networks and local actors is structured. Sustainable change in societies, even those in conflict, is only possible when structures of power become more accountable to their populations. Activism led from foreign capitals either deliberately or inadvertently empowers a public distant from the risks and solutions to a conflict, rather than further empowering those conflict-affected populations. This runs a danger of ignoring how responses designed around domestic political opportunities in western capitals can actually participate in the very harm they claim to be ending, or create new harms. Celebrity activism also generates a narrative that places the celebrity at the center of the story, as a heroic figure righting wrongs in a fantasy of redemption. The celebrity activists' simple sketch of harm as the product of ethical imbalance lacks an understanding of how power operates in both the conflict-affected society as well as their own, and therefore blinds such activism to its own productive role in the conditions it claims to want to ameliorate.

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However, a simple call to reverse this priority and privilege the local, while it would produce some improvements, may not be enough to grasp the core dynamics at play. As demonstrated across the board in the cases examined in the seminar, international NGOs along with western policymakers and the media, have established a dominant human rights framework with an attendant narrative of rescue from evil that has become internalized among many local actors as well. This is particularly the case where those local actors are relatively powerless and lack self-confidence, so they may cling to foreign explanations of their plight, setting aside their own deeper understandings. Local actors' expectations and demands may follow accordingly. There is further a significant power imbalance between local actors and international NGOs, visible most notably in terms of access to funds.

The imbalance of power, including the power to define the conflict and shape the response is illustrated across the board in cases discussed.

The Burmese case is instructive: for years, when the country was of little strategic or commercial significance to the U.S., Burmese dissidents and international activists defined the problem in simplified black-and-white terms and called for total reform. When Burma achieved strategic importance after 2008, Burmese activists no longer set the agenda, allowing for a "Buddhist turn" in western advocacy: unable to change the reality, activists have been content to change their perception. Very little has changed in

Burma, except the international narrative. Indeed, the repression of ethnic minorities that reside in resource-rich areas may be set to worsen, notwithstanding some of the trappings of political liberalization.

Other instances of power relations in defining problems and solutions include the expectation from rebel groups in Darfur that an international intervention might yet come to "save" them. This false expectation impeded the Darfur peace process. Among people in the area affected by the LRA, the profile and publicity generated by *KONY2012* has led many to believe that a massive policy shift from the U.S.—including the deployment of tens of thousands of troops—would be forthcoming. In Congo, rights-talk that refuses to address the role of neighboring countries, in particular Rwanda, casts a shadow over all international engagement. In the case of Gaza, the state of Israel adeptly allows law-based advocacy because the Israeli courts consistently decide in favor of the state. The internationally accepted script for the Gaza conflict is that a democratic Israeli state is confronting terrorists across its border, rather than that of an occupying power failing to meet its obligations to protect and provide for the local population.

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And, it should be noted that simplistic narratives tend to empower actors whose interests do not coincide with those of the affected people. Joseph Kony's power arises out of the very narrative of his mystical strength that IC's campaign sought to elevate. Ironically, therefore, the goals of IC and the LRA converged—to paint him and the terror he is able to inspire as being of significance out of proportion to his actual capabilities. The hardliners in the Sudanese military are repeatedly strengthened in their domestic power struggles by the saber-rattling of American Darfur campaigners, the arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court, and the partisan reports of the Satellite Sentinel Project that publishes intelligence-style reports on Sudanese troop movements, but never on their adversaries.

## Precedents

An underlying theme of the discussions was the risk of romanticizing previous efforts and of applying the wrong precedent. This thread was introduced when one speaker cited a common, but arguably mistaken understanding of the Vietnam war. Contrary to widely-held beliefs in the U.S., the war ended less because of the shifts in American public opinion and more because the Vietnamese had made the war unsustainable for the U.S. The war was fought equally in the political and military spheres—and the U.S. lost. It was not American public opinion, but Vietnamese local actors who played the leading role in the ending.

Similarly, Burmese activists cited the example of South Africa's transition as a "success story" of isolating an oppressive regime and thereby forcing into making concessions with a democratic opposition. In hindsight, there are many South Africans who wonder if they could have constructed the transition differently, as the fundamental structures of socio-economic inequality remained intact. Burmese, like

South Africans, are coming to regret their embrace of international sanctions against the regime, which also isolated the wider population.

Another "success story" that warrants closer interrogation is the campaign to prohibit anti-personnel land mines. Many of the activists involved in initiating and running this campaign feared that the Ottawa Convention that introduced a partial ban on anti-personnel land mines was premature. Many campaigners believed that with this partial ban, success had been achieved. However, the ban was incomplete—the U.S. did not sign up, and there was no global fund set up for land mine eradication—while the supposed victory meant that the popular campaign was demobilized before its ultimate objectives could be achieved. The lesson from this example is that activists must be careful not to equate obtaining a tool (a legal measure such as a convention) with success in solving the problem (which requires a deeper shift in morality and behavior, and more resources).

Another example is the conflict minerals strategy in DRC, which took as its model from the Kimberley Process designed to combat the trade in "blood diamonds" that had fueled conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Given significant differences between the capacity to source and control other artisanal minerals versus diamonds, and the fact that these minerals constituted just one part of the overall Congolese war economy, this precedent had limited applicability. When the Enough Project took this issue on, it soon found that the consensus among specialists was against its position, but preferred to disregard evidence and expertise on and from Congo, defining success as passing a bill in Congress, not changing things for the better on the ground.

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The precedents that would make more sense are those within a country's own history of struggle for rights. The Congolese for instance, have a long history of strong civil society engagement that has set the political agenda for the country, associated with a pronounced tendency not to vote along ethnic lines—maintaining a remarkable nationwide identity as Congolese. For Congolese activists, the issue of "conflict minerals" was a minor issue on their agenda. Their central concern has been the elections. Congolese activists are also concerned at the way in which their country has become something of a playground for foreigners seeking good causes, ranging from minerals to child soldiers to sexual violence: "anyone can make a name for themselves by talking about Congo." Congolese pose a test for foreign activists: can they share what they write with their Congolese sources, and if they do, will those Congolese remain friends with them?

Sudan also has a strong tradition of non-violent political action in which domestic civil society sets a national political agenda, but the potential for a social movement of this kind has been profoundly compromised by an international advocacy agenda that advocated foreign military intervention and partition. Uganda also has developed indigenous models for reconciliation in the aftermath of its internal conflicts, often undertaken with great bravery by local actors, that might serve as stronger precedents for envisioning responses to its challenges today.

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# Contending Advocacies

Advocacy for human rights and against violence and armed conflict has historically defined itself in opposition to the powers-that-be. The new generation of U.S.-based activists aim for a privileged position within the policy dialogue inside the nation's capital with Congress and the Administration, and similarly with respect to the debates in the United Nations Security Council. A lot of this work is therefore better described as lobbying rather than advocacy. However, by publicly positioning themselves as "activists," these groups tend to crowd out other voices—including dissenting opinions from the affected countries.

A critically important example of contending advocacies is the case of Gaza, which takes the form of advocacy for or against Israel. On the Israeli side, there is a largely successful attempt to present the conflict as symmetrical between two equal warring parties. The Israeli script is that it is a democracy (the only one in the Middle East) which has withdrawn from Gaza; terrorists have taken control in Gaza and are threatening Israel; and Israel is responding in self-defense. However, the Israeli government is imposing *de facto* occupation on Gaza, while refusing the international legal obligations that accompany occupation. Israel is normalizing the status quo in both Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and, on the basis of ostensible withdrawal from Gaza, reducing the problems there to a humanitarian issue. As so often occurs, the charitable relationship disempowers its recipients and delegitimizes their political claims.

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However, both Israeli rights organizations and international advocates are challenging this narrative. They face enormous obstacles in doing so, including the near-impossibility of gaining access to Gaza to witness what is happening, and a dominant script that portrays Israel as the historic victim and the persistently injured party. There are many ironies, including the actual conduct of the Israeli state in denying basic commodities and basic dignity: "engineering the Palestinians into perpetual beggars." Another is the widespread readiness of Israelis to accept ignorance about what is going on: in general, Israelis "don't want to know." But the facts speak for themselves: most ceasefires were broken by Israel, the level of nutrition available for the Gazans is below international standards, and Gaza continues to be "one big prison."

Human rights language currently provides the best opportunity for opening debate on political options, including the possibility of a "one-state solution." But some activists are worried that pursuing incremental improvements through human rights and humanitarian actions is merely legitimizing a system that is profoundly unjust and resistant to significant reform. Some Palestinians are now saying, "save us from the saviors!" and want the brute realities of the occupation to be recognized.

The Israel-Palestine case, so often treated as *sui generis* and in isolation from other instances, is an illuminating comparison and contrast. This is helpful for drawing lessons, both for this and other cases, and

for normalizing the study of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. One intriguing connection is that young Jewish people in the U.S. were heavily involved in championing campaigns around Rwanda and Darfur. In contrast to the standard Jewish narrative that positions the Holocaust as an historically unique episode, this generation is applying a Jewish sensibility to suffering to other cases in the world. Notwithstanding some missteps in the portrayal of these conflicts, this represents a significant globalization of the Jewish conscience.

## Not All Theories Of Change Are Equally Valid

A theory of change includes an end-goal and the steps necessary to achieve that goal. Along the way, one might debate the final goal, the strategy for getting there or the tactics. However, as the examples discussed demonstrate, these components need to be considered in an integrated and holistic manner.

The emergent model of western-focused advocacy has as its core approach a set of practices that focus on the institutional and political priorities of the western advocacy groups themselves. These include: "ego-activism" or the promotion of a celebrity-based narrative, a "boutique approach" to action items, and liberal human rights agenda as both method and goal.

A fine example is Invisible Children (IC). Having worked in Uganda for some time, the senior staff of IC would be expected to possess a better knowledge of the situation than was evident in the *KONY2012* video. It is therefore fair to conclude that this video intentionally purveyed a misrepresentation of the conflict today, so as to make the viewers of the video feel like they held all the levers for control and necessary understanding in their own hands. For this reason, one might call this "ego-activism."

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The "boutique approach" to conflicts is exemplified by the conflict minerals campaign, which identifies a small component of a conflict and proposes ways to address that in isolation from the wider picture. This example is particularly pertinent because, in DRC, the question conflict minerals is not of central concern to the Congolese population, and nor is income from these minerals the central factor in the conflict dynamic. However, boutique activists seized upon it as an issue because it was seen as an instance in which U.S. based actors could make an impact. Congolese actors placed more emphasis on transparency in contracts of major mining interests, the recent elections, and governance issues. The Frank-Dodd bill, which seeks to prohibit international companies from sourcing minerals from DRC and neighboring countries, however, has made an impact: it forced local miners out of work as companies do not see how they can reliably source non-conflict-certified minerals from DRC and so buy elsewhere; and it impelled armed groups to seek income from other activities, like taxing trade at checkpoints and extracting assets from local communities. There is indeed an indication that predatory violence against communities in eastern DRC has increased as a result of the Dodd-Frank

act. All this was foreseen by Congolese activists and specialists but their voices were not heard by advocacy groups in the U.S.

The liberal rights agenda historically emerged as a set of claims against the violation of state power, but has often become a prescription for political solutions as no more than a pared-down agenda of individual legal remedies. The liberal rights agenda too often leaves unexamined the relationship between the assertion of rights and claims and the enhancement of the state's power, through its monopoly on violence, law or commercial interests. This theme was exemplified most in the cases of Burma/Myanmar and Gaza. In both cases activists who were primarily local—Burmese and Israeli—relied on rights-based campaigns to expose harms done in conflict situations and to energize a political agenda.

> **None of these measures of success is without meaning—however, if they are not contextualized within a larger goal of transforming conflict, then activism itself threatens to mistake conflict solutions for activists' own measurements of what "we" can do.**

In the case of Burma, the democracy activists' strategy of internationally isolating the regime also resulted in isolating the people from the opportunity of engaging in debate on their future. This thereby stifled the development of a community-based approach to re-thinking governance. Change, then, when it did finally come, brought an opening of political practice alongside an opening of the Burmese economy to western investment, but no society-wide discussion of rights. In the context of the growing power of China, the U.S. sought to win Burma away from an exclusively Chinese sphere of influence, and brokered an elite pact that provided for a modest degree of political liberalization without fundamentally altering the structure of power. As one consequence, assaults against ethnic minorities continue—and have even escalated in the case of the Rohingya.

In Gaza, Israeli rights activists have brought many legal cases, but the referral to the courts serves to protect Israel's reputation as a democratic country and the decisions do not impact Israeli exclusion of populations it still controls. It allows the illusion of rights protection without affecting the core conditions. Humanitarian measures similarly provide for the essentials to reach some people, but distract attention from the obligations that fall upon the Israeli authorities. Gaza is *de facto*, and arguably *de jure*, an Israeli occupied territory and is subject to policies designed to degrade the capacity of the local people to live in a dignified manner with any element of political autonomy. The Israeli government has become ever more skilled at contesting every legal technicality, compelling activists to measure progress in ever-smaller quanta of legal process, with less and less relevance to the actual lives of the people of Gaza. It is arguable that the small measures undertaken to ameliorate the situation of the Gazans are lessening the pressure on Israel to live up to its moral and legal obligations, and thus prolonging or intensifying the suffering and violation of rights of the residents of Gaza.

Each of these strategies raises questions about the ultimate goal of advocacy campaigns as their measures

of success are often distanced from the change in social conditions and political empowerment for the most vulnerable affected communities. In ego-activism, the amount of money and other capacities monopolized by the implementation of a marketing campaign often results in measuring success within in terms of "awareness." In the boutique model, success is measured by discrete, narrowly-defined policy changes—as passage of legislation, for instance. In the liberal agenda, success may be identified as a measure of implementation of technical tools, such as legal cases.

None of these measures of success is without meaning—however, if they are not contextualized within a larger goal of transforming conflict, then activism itself threatens to mistake conflict solutions for activists' own measurements of what "we" can do. Simply doing things within "our" reach is fundamentally different from empowering an affected people and resolving the conflict and violations that so profoundly affect their lives.

A further challenge to both strategies and goals for activism is "status quo activism," engagement that makes a pretense of challenging the status quo (in the U.S.) but in fact makes such minor demands on policy that its main impact is to tie up members of Congress and the executive in lengthy exercises of managing public relations. The kinds of demands forwarded to the U.S. administration by these campaigns include appointing a special envoy (for Sudan), maintaining a policy of keeping several scores of military advisors (for Uganda), or—the most substantive for U.S. policy—changing procurement practices for companies. In none of the cases, was a profound change in U.S. policy demanded.

The Save Darfur movement is a striking example: it rarely asked the U.S. government to alter its policies, and instead rather it invariably echoed and amplified policy decisions already made by the Bush Administration. The Darfur campaign came most into conflict with the U.S. government when the government attempted to change its approach in line with the evolving conflict while activists remained attached to a narrative adopted at the launch of the Darfur campaign in 2004, which was increasingly out of step with changed realities in Darfur.

## Professional Incentives

Such newly construed international activism faces significant incentives to continue to develop along the lines outlined herein—in terms of fundraising, visibility and political influence. The seminar participants found this model deeply problematic and in need of challenge. But moving beyond the international activists, there is a problematic incentive structure within the "expert" field as well—for academicians and researchers, professional advancement requires production of scholarly publications, articulated in relation to the developing body of other researchers. There are few incentives to value accessibility for wider publics. The field is therefore left open for superficial analyses.

Additionally, academic political science has drifted away from country-level political analysis, a key element for understanding how conflicts unfold, instead valuing large datasets that convert into quantitative studies. Finally, many "expert" insights are produced with limited evidence as well—one study of recent

research reports on Southern Sudan, for instance, found that an overwhelming portion focused solely on Dinka communities, strikingly concentrated on conditions in Juba, the capital.

## In Conclusion: which limits are exposed?

Publicity grabbing campaigns on places in conflict have been criticized for how they offer inaccurate descriptions of conditions, simplify narratives, promote bad policy recommendations, alienate location populations and end up by deepening or prolonging crisis. It is worth emphasizing, however, that these campaigns mark both a departure from as well as a continuation of previous human rights practices. They depart in that they try to mobilize the public on a scale and with a speed never before attempted, thereby fixing what they perceived to be a lack of motivation for U.S. policymakers to take international rights claims seriously because there was no organized constituency asking for change. With a more active public, so the theory goes, human rights issues rise on the national agenda and better solutions are implemented.

> **Rights can only be claimed in the context of political struggle.**

The chosen *modus operandi* of these campaigns is to operate very close to centers of power in Washington DC, seeking policy reform. By mobilizing large numbers of followers, these campaigns superficially resemble mass protest movements. In fact, they are more akin to concert going crowds choreographed by insider lobbyists.

These campaigns also share many assumptions of the professional human rights field, which established its practices as naming and shaming governments into curbing abuses, thereby obliging them to live up to the tenets of agreements they had signed onto or that form a new normative consensus. The assumptions reside in presenting abuses as infractions of universal values—an ethical betrayal that produces clear victims and perpetrators. It is a worldview based upon a set of liberal norms framed in legalistic terms. In certain cases, this has opened the door to political activism for more profound change, as happened with the post-1989 changes in eastern Europe. In other cases, it is the only approach possible, and activists pursue it both for concrete gains, and also in hope of opening political space for democratic empowerment.

But there is also an alternative worldview that focuses instead on political struggle against hegemonic power. This approach also recognizes rights as intrinsically valuable, but argues that they can only be claimed in the context of political struggle. To the extent that campaigning for a narrow spectrum of human rights or advocating for the U.S. to pursue more ethical policies in its foreign relations diverts attention from the principal political issues, that form of rights-based activism may not in fact advance

rights in an effective and sustainable manner. It may—in the memorable phrase of one writer—leave local people "prisoners of freedom."[1]

Without a theory of power, and working strictly within the boundaries established by the U.S. political establishment—albeit by global standards a remarkably democratic and accessible hegemon—today's broad-based campaigns amplify this ethical, universalist, legal approach.  These campaigns testify to a limit of human rights as a framework for social, economic or political change. This does not in any sense mean that rights are useless, but rather than they cannot accomplish all aspects of social justice or political change.

These "designer activist" campaigns do not advertise the limits of their capacity for enacting change. On the contrary, they promise that much can be achieved by many Americans doing remarkably little. Consequently, a theme that arose in the seminar was the danger—indeed the reality—of exhaustion and disenchantment among supporters of the campaigns. This draws attention to the likelihood that young people in Europe and America becoming disillusioned and cynical when the promised goals are not reached. Although, as one participant remarked in reference to reports of "Congo fatigue" among American activists and Congressmen, the Congolese are not fatigued with their country.

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Equally troubling whether one is critical of how campaigns have been practiced or the framework that they assume, is the allergy to criticism that such campaigns exhibit. As demonstrated repeatedly in the African cases, and exemplified by the campaigns mounted by the Enough Project, such activism has only a passing acquaintance with facts, in contrast with their leaders' intimacy with powerbrokers. Without seriously engaging their record and being open to self-criticism, these campaigns do their ideals—let alone the very populations on whose behalf they claim to be advocating —a serious disservice.

The seminar concluded with an emergent authentic activist agenda, which is the need for those who genuinely care about the empowerment of the people affected by these conflicts, to find ways of challenging those responsible for the immediate violation of rights and the perpetuation of armed conflict, as well as those who pretend to offer solutions that, however well packaged, are no more than a self-serving illusion. Among the specific challenges were addressing complexity and confusion, finding ways of

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[1] Englund, Harri, *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

speaking truth to governmental decision makers and their celebrity-activist partners, and refining the criteria for doing no harm in advocacy—raising "bewareness."

*Note: Additional information about this seminar, including short essays by several participants, can be found on the World Peace Foundation blog, Reinventing Peace,* http://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/ *.*

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