

## **Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development**

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\*Biography: Barbra Chimhandamba holds a Ph.D. in Political Science and an M.A. in Political Science, both from Carleton University, as well as a B.A. Honours degree in French from the University of Zimbabwe. In her Ph.D. dissertation, Barbra investigates an issue that is pertinent and timely in light of the increasing involvement of celebrities, including pop singers, movie stars and high-profile, high-net worth individuals in humanitarian and philanthropic work, bringing attention to poverty, pandemics and other disasters around the world. The dissertation, entitled, *Celebrity Humanitarianism and the Politics of Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, investigates the benefits and limitations of celebrity-led humanitarian and philanthropic organizations for development and the impact of celebrity humanitarianism on development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Her research interests include International Relations, Comparative Politics, Global Political Economy, Development Studies and Global Ethics. Barbra has worked as a foreign service officer and has over 25 years' experience in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. She has served as a diplomat in various countries and at the United Nations Office in Vienna, Austria.

Biographie: Barbra Chimhandamba détient un doctorat en sciences politiques et une maîtrise en sciences politiques, tous deux de l'Université Carleton, ainsi qu'un baccalauréat spécialisé en français de l'Université du Zimbabwe. Dans sa thèse de doctorat, Barbra étudie une question pertinente et opportune à la lumière de l'implication croissante des célébrités, y compris les chanteurs pop, les stars de cinéma et les personnes très en vue et très fortunées, dans le travail humanitaire et philanthropique, attirant l'attention sur la pauvreté, les pandémies et autres catastrophes dans le monde. La thèse, intitulée *Celebrity Humanitarianism and the Politics of Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, étudie les avantages et les limites des organisations humanitaires et philanthropiques dirigées par des célébrités pour le développement et l'impact de l'humanitarisme des célébrités sur le développement en Afrique subsaharienne. Ses recherches portent sur les relations internationales, la politique comparée, l'économie politique mondiale, les études de développement et l'éthique mondiale. Barbra a travaillé en tant qu'agent du service extérieur et possède plus de 25 ans d'expérience en diplomatie bilatérale et multilatérale. Elle a été diplomate dans divers pays et au bureau des Nations unies à Vienne, en Autriche.

Batman Saves the Congo narrates and analyzes the activities of celebrity, Ben Affleck – “the main star of Batman, the movie” – and his Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI) in Eastern Congo. In Affleck’s view, “complex development puzzles could be solved through celebrity strategic partnerships that link players inside and outside the aid sector and are supported by US diplomatic and financial investments” (p.x). For Affleck, celebrity strategic partnerships are not charity or aid, but “good business” (p.xi). He presents the ECI as a disruptor in the development industry. Indeed, celebrity strategic partnerships are hailed as “working aid out of business” by providing private sector solutions to local development. Alexandra Cosima Budabin and Lisa Ann Richey use the ECI case study to analyze the relationships celebrities engage in with other donors, implementers and the Congolese recipients on the ground. The authors’ main argument is that, contrary to the claim by celebrity humanitarians that celebrity strategic partnerships disrupt the usual politics of development and humanitarianism, the reality is that these partnerships expose the elite networking praxis and the profit-driven nature of development practices.

The book presents findings which challenge three major assumptions in three areas of scholarship. Firstly, it challenges the argument in international development studies that celebrity strategic partnerships and celebrity humanitarianism differ from conventional development actors. The book demonstrates that celebrities and their partners, who include philanthropists and private firms, are “elite players in an elitist field” who do not cause any significant disruption in the development arena. Secondly, the book disputes the argument that emanates from a celebrity studies perspective that the institutionalization of long-term investment and collaboration in celebrity strategic partnerships comes with more accountability than short-term celebrity humanitarian initiatives. The book argues that these partnerships perpetuate “an affective visibility” and benefit celebrities and traditional development players, with little demand for accountability. Lastly, in the realm of global politics, there may be a suggestion that celebrity strategic partnerships’ capacity to bring several stakeholders together to cooperate in development activities would have meant greater representation for the Congolese people. But, on the contrary, these practices are characterized by inequalities which are typical of North-South relations.

The book, however, notes that celebrity strategic partnerships, while not necessarily disrupting traditional ways of doing international development, are distinct from old-fashioned development in that celebrities have the capacity to attract new funding from the philanthropic and private sectors. Celebrities can also bring attention to operations of international development and humanitarian organizations, as well as to market the business model to the general public and elites.

The book is clearly structured into seven chapters, which are all well-argued. The terms are clearly defined. Specifically, the term ‘celebrities’ is unpacked, making it clear that they are not only pop singers or movie stars, but have varied backgrounds and all share “public recognition and circulation” (Drake & Miah, 2010, p. 52 cited in Budabin & Richey, 2021, p. 5). Other terms such as humanitarianism (p. 5), disruption (p. 14) and convening power (p. 24) are also clarified. One of the book’s strengths is its captivating title, “Batman Saves the Congo” – the Congo being a country plagued by conflict and poverty since colonial times. Therefore, the suggestion (from the title) that it will be saved, and by ‘Batman’ appeals to the imagination of the potential reader. The chronicling of the history of celebrity humanitarianism in the Congo as a prelude to the contemporary celebrity strategic partnerships is another strength as it clearly contextualizes ECI. Furthermore, the authors forestall possible critique of the book’s case study – Ben Affleck and his NGO, Eastern Congo Initiative – by presenting a compelling justification of why they chose this case study and not others, perhaps more well-known ones.

It is indisputable that ECI’s involvement in Eastern Congo did disrupt conventional development practices to some extent, but it by no means “worked aid out of business” as Affleck claimed it would do. Moreover, celebrity strategic partnerships are not necessarily the innovative approach to development that they are touted to be. They represent the privatization of development which prioritizes profit-making by elites that has coincided with neoliberalism. The activities of Affleck and ECI are characterized by negative power dynamics and re-entrench the saviour-victim hierarchy, thus perpetuating, rather than challenging, the inequalities that exist between the givers of aid and the recipients. The Congolese public which is represented by Affleck does not have a chance to express its own views on his work.

Thus, in the conclusion, the authors question why Affleck did not use his fame and fortune in more progressive ways such as the promotion of democracy and global justice and letting the recipients of aid articulate their own agenda, rather than acting as their spokesperson while, in effect, highlighting his own.

The style of *Batman Saves the Congo* makes it accessible not only to academics and practitioners of international development, but also to the general public which has an interest in celebrity humanitarianism, a phenomenon which has come to the fore in recent years as celebrities have been increasingly involved in humanitarian and philanthropic activities, bringing attention to poverty, pandemics and other disasters across the globe. This book is a valuable contribution to the complex issue of celebrity involvement in international development. It is an addition to the burgeoning literature on celebrity humanitarianism and celebrity philanthropy by authors who have a deep knowledge of these issues.

### References

- Budabin, A. C., & Richey, L. A. (2021). *Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development on JSTOR*. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1nj351p>