



# The Unintended Impact of Star Power Charity



**ENGLISH PRACTICE** – What could possibly go wrong when superheroes try to help others? **Do celebrities do more harm than good when they get involved with aid and development?** Our book *Batman Saves the Congo* offers research on the unintended impact of star power.

**Bozen** – The term *celebrity humanitarianism* encompasses the ways in which celebrities continue to deepen their engagement in development and humanitarian causes. Celebrities have a long history of participating in humanitarian and development causes, raising attention and funds for international bodies. This activity increased in the 1980s and 1990s and the UN now even has a dedicated Celebrity Relations Department for its celebrity goodwill ambassadors. Celebrity humanitarians act as spokespersons for non-governmental organizations like *Save the Children* or for corporate-led campaigns like *Product Red*. Some celebrities also create their own organizations to focus on specific regions or issues.

## The case study "Ben Affleck"

A recent and most interesting example of this is Ben Affleck, the American director, producer, and actor, who recently appeared as the superhero Batman. In 2010, Affleck established the organization *Eastern Congo Initiative* to bring development to the region and to transform how development is practiced. Our book looks closely at Affleck's organization to better understand the impact that celebrity humanitarians can have.

Celebrity humanitarianism has already been the subject of much debate. While celebrities are useful to organizations for raising money and attention, their presence reinforces some troubling trends. First, there are concerns that celebrities lack expertise: they have been known to simplify issues and demonstrate superficial engagement. Second, sometimes the celebrities draw too much attention to themselves with the result that the cause becomes an **afterthought**. Third, celebrity humanitarians reflect uncomfortable power dynamics where people in the North speak on behalf of and without the consent of people in the South.

**Sometimes the celebrities draw too much attention to themselves with the result that the cause becomes an afterthought.**

Interestingly, Ben Affleck set himself apart from other celebrity humanitarians in a few ways. First, he spent a few years learning about the Congo, traveling to the country, and meeting experts. He acts as the main spokesperson for his organization but he didn't name it after himself. *Eastern Congo Initiative* has an office in Goma, Eastern Congo, where they have local staff and partner with grassroots organizations. When he speaks about the Congo, Affleck references the work of these grassroots community organizations.

However, a major critique of celebrity humanitarians concerns the ways in which their participation reflects and

reinforces *elite practices in development*. By being supported by financial and political elites in the West, celebrities can quickly gain a visible platform for their ideas. But if the ideas aren't sound, celebrities themselves cannot be held accountable. It was Affleck's initiative that started his organization, not the Congolese.

## Elite practices reflected in different ways

For Affleck and his organization, elite practices are reflected in different ways. First, he hired a strategic management firm to build his organization. Affleck has been invited numerous times to speak in front of the US Congress and other spheres of influence to speak about development in the Congo, centering his narrative of saving Congo. And finally, the main topic of our book, these elite practices are shown with celebrity humanitarian's cozy engagement with other private sector actors.

In our book, Lisa A. Richey and I use the term *celebrity strategic partnerships* to discuss the ways in which celebrities and their organizations link traditional **development actors** (like donor agencies) with nontraditional actors like corporations and philanthropists. We argue that, as elite figures, celebrities shape development

practices by convening these strategic partnerships that draw new financial and political capital with the support of old development actors.

## INFO

## Glossary

**afterthought:** Anhängsel  
**development actors:** Entwicklungshilfe-Akteure  
**to convene:** einberufen, versammeln  
**Bukavu:** eine 870.000-Einwohner-Stadt im Osten der Demokratischen Republik Kongo  
**Catholic Relief Services (CRS):** ist eine internationale tätige humanitäre Organisation der katholischen Gemeinschaft der USA  
**gathering:** Treffen, Versammlung  
**to mass:** zusammenziehen, sammeln  
**unsettling:** beunruhigend, verwirrend  
**political advocacy:** politischer Einsatz  
**misguided:** verfehlt, unangebracht



Ben Affleck, American director, producer, and actor, - and founder of the organization *Eastern Congo Initiative*

**Celebrity humanitarians are able to bring together important resources for development causes – new actors, funding sources, and innovative solutions. But their deepening engagement is leading to greater privatization of development and elite management from North to South with unsettling consequences.**

continued inefficiently not offering better outcomes to coffee farmers than less-celebritized projects.

## Troubling trend in an environment of unaccountable elite leadership in North-South relations

However, celebrity strategic partnerships also signal a troubling trend in an environment of unaccountable elite leadership in North-South relations. Affleck's organization convened the partnership to aid the coffee sector even though ECI had no expertise in coffee production and little knowledge of rural development. The opportunity to raise awareness to the realities of coffee farming and the challenges of development in the Congo was limited. Consumers learned that Starbucks was heroically helping in Congo but little else. As an idea, the collaboration promoted a business model for development, configurations that have few positive impacts at the local level. Affleck as the public "face" carried a distorted and simplified message to mass publics and elite audiences.

## Conclusions

Our book asks: Can Batman save the Congo? And the answer is that though celebrity humanitarians are able to bring together important resources for development causes - new actors,

funding sources, and innovative solutions - their deepening engagement is leading to greater privatization of development and elite management from North to South with **unsettling** consequences for workers in the development field and especially the beneficiaries. Celebrities use their star appeal to attract our attention; in the case of celebrity strategic partnerships, we are being sold a mixed message. Rather than mobilizing us to engage in **political advocacy** to assist Congo, Affleck asked us to buy coffee as part of the "business of development." But short-term transactions will not save Congo in the long-run and only remakes helping into the "development of business." Thus, the impact of celebrities in development needs to be taken seriously for these **misguided** interventions.

Alexandra Cosima Budabin and Lisa Ann Richey



**INFO** One of the authors, **Alexandra Cosima Budabin**, is a researcher in the Faculty of Design and Art with the Platform Cultural Heritage

Cultural Production at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. She received her PhD in Politics from the New School for Social Research in New York City in 2012. Her research looks at transnational advocacy, everyday humanitarianism, visual politics, and narratives. Book about the research is available for purchase at <https://www.combinedacademic.co.uk/9781517907594/batman-saves-the-congo/> Book website: <https://lisaannrichey.wixsite.com/batmansavesthecongo>