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The power of normal people
by Ben Affleck

Before traveling to parts of Africa suffering from poverty and conflict, I expected what I had seen on television—helpless victims. What I saw when I got there couldn't have been more different.

I was in Sudan and had mentioned to one of my hosts, the National Democratic Institute, that I was interested in the current negotiations on the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between Northern and Southern Sudan and the more obscure Abyei Protocol. They said they could arrange for me to attend meeting where these agreements were being discussed. I assumed I would be listening in on some government or diplomatic gathering. I was humbled when I saw the dirt floored hut where I was being taken—and surprised to see that it wasn't a 'government meeting' at all but rather one of ordinary citizens.

Amid squalor and cracked earth, South Sudanese—some barefoot and hungry—had gathered to have an in depth discussion about the nuance of these complex political documents. It would have been as if I had traveled to New Jersey and found my countrymen gathered in a Denny's for a daylong discussion about the merits of Congressional legislation. That day I began to reexamine both my assumptions about Africa and the West.

I became fascinated in the politics of the developing world in college. I became interested in actively doing something in Africa much later when it became clear to me that the pursuit of my own career, needs and agenda was not sufficient for the kind of human I wanted to be. I've been blessed with good fortune and feel an urgency to contribute to humanity in a more concrete and substantial way.

At the same time, I was deeply hesitant to begin advocating for anything too quickly as I knew I needed (and still need) to learn before speaking – and was afraid of being that cliché: the celebrity who has only come for a photo opportunity, and whose involvement with the cause is, in truth, designed to do more good for the celebrity than the cause.

From the humblest possible vantage, I set about extensive travel throughout Africa to learn. I've tried to use the access I get, not to stand in front of microphones, but to listen to leaders, thinkers, activists and amazing individuals throughout Africa and the West who are having significant positive impact by doing the best work. It has been my honor and good fortune to have inconvenienced some extraordinary men and women who took the time to teach me a great deal about what has been tried, what has and has not worked and how a person like me might support the progress that is being made on a number of challenging issues facing various countries, communities and people in Africa.

I've traveled to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Rwanda, the Republic of Congo, Southern Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania and many stops in between. I have listened to and learned from people such as Empowering Hands who work with former child soldiers in Gulu, Uganda and HEAL Africa who are the only health care professionals performing life-saving reconstructive surgery on victims of gender-based violence in Goma, DRC. In Ituri, DRC, I walked through a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital as they explained why at least 1,200 people die in the DRC each day from conflict related causes, and how they care for infants born prematurely weighing on average only 1-2 kilograms.

It can seem that the need in Africa is everywhere and overwhelming, but this view ignores the fact that where there are great challenges, there is a potential for great change.

In DRC, there are extraordinary peace negotiators who built fragile coalitions that are attempting to stabilize the eastern DRC. In Sudan, I have seen the actual construction of democracy with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in their capital of Juba as they tried to prevent civil war from breaking out again. In the Gihembe Refugee Camp in Rwanda, the American Refugee Committee (ARC) introduced me to a few of the 18,000 Congolese Tutsi Banyamulenge refugees living there. ARC is managing to support

this entire camp community with an annual budget that is equal to the cost of 3 minutes of the war in Iraq.

In order to understand the root causes of violence we must look to those who endure it, of hunger from those who feel it acutely, and of conflict from those who face it down at their doorstep. These individuals are not victims. They are leaders who have much to share and to teach.

It is an important but deceptively difficult task when approaching these topics to set aside preconceived notions about Africa and the West.

I am given to excessive enthusiasm. Sometimes when I am under such a spell and enthusiastically going on about Africa, some wise soul will offer, in cautious rebuttal, the old adage: Give a man a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish, he will eat forever. I have found this adage not entirely accurate. In my experience, Africans know how to fish—they simply need an ocean to fish in.

