

We Don't Need Another Hero

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. The much quoted linguist Noam Chomsky said we shouldn't be looking for heroes, we should be looking for good ideas. Yet in the age of individualism, we regularly confuse good ideas with a search for a hero. This ego festival has created saviour complexes that have become so pernicious they've derailed the most well intentioned plans.

Ross Jordan Flaherty, welcome to Renegade Inc. Great to have you.

Jordan Flaherty Thank you and thank you for having this show exist and raising attention to important issues like these. I really appreciate your voice in the media.

Ross No More Heroes, your book, covers the sort of phenomena that we're living through at the moment, this hero complex. Just define for us, if you will, what you see as a hero complex or a hero mentality.

Jordan Flaherty In my work doing journalism, I found this was coming up a lot in the reporting I was doing, that I saw people acting in this way, especially people coming from a position of privilege, acting this way that they were seeking to save others. So when I think about, for example, this idea that communities being helped don't know what they need, that someone from outside can come in and save them themselves. And I think it also comes down to what's been known as the great man theory of history, this idea that this great leader will come and tell people what to do.

Ross And the unsung heroes around all this, the people who do the nuts and bolts stuff at grassroots level, they're the cohesion aren't they? They are the sort of social glue that holds all this thing together. And then out pops this one figure. They get all the adulation. And actually what we've done is airbrush out all the, let's say, effort, but also all the hopes and dreams and desires and push for social change that all of those people have come together to create?

Jordan Flaherty Exactly. I'm really fortunate to live in New Orleans, Louisiana, and I've gotten to study and learn from a lot of civil rights movement veterans and black power movement veterans, people like Curtis Muhammad, who was recruited as the teenager out of McComb, Mississippi, and Malik Rahim, who was part of the New Orleans chapter of the Black Panther Party. These are the people that don't necessarily make the headlines, that don't necessarily get the books written about them, but they and millions of others were out there in the streets fighting for change and really made these movements happen and made change happen in this country.

Ross Why is this hero complex or saviour mentality so prevalent now?

Jordan Flaherty Well, I think there's a lot of systemic reasons. If you look at our education system, I think that they teach this kind of great man theory of history. If you look at our entertainment industry, look at Hollywood, look at superhero films, I think that Batman is this perfect saviour superhero, right? He's this rich man. But instead of giving away his

money to people in need, he just spends it all on himself and his Batcave and Bat tools and goes out to save the world. And I think, you know, when we see these stories from a young age, we start to get this idea that that's how change happens. You know when they construct Hollywood movies, as a screenwriter, you're told to find who this hero is and make a single protagonist. And it's very rare to see any film that doesn't have more than one protagonist where the protagonist is a movement, even, for example, films about the labour movement, right? It's always about one person that stands up instead of this mass of people standing up. So it gives us this really false idea of how change happens. And it's really disempowering ultimately, right, because if we're not the hero, if we're not Batman, if we're not Martin Luther King, then it makes us think we just need to stay at home because these heroes are going to be out there shaping the change.

Ross Teach First, here in the UK, Teach for America over in the States. These programmes are all about going and showing the rest of the world how civilised and sophisticated the West is. How damaging have those been, especially when earnest young men and women go to far flung places and visit upon citizens of those places, their ideas?

Jordan Flaherty Well here in New Orleans, we had this really significant example of how Teach for America works. Of course, we had Hurricane Katrina back in 2005 and it was like the same issues people are facing everywhere but on hyper speed, because all of a sudden 80 percent of the housing was flooded and all of our public housing was shut down. So the residents of public housing were not allowed to return to their homes. And you had the criminal system suddenly ramping up, police just being told they could do whatever they wanted. And in education, you had the entire staff of the school system, seventy five hundred teachers, lunchroom workers, everyone, fired overnight and they began to be replaced with Teach for America. And the teachers were about 60 percent African-American women. But you had these mostly young white volunteers that came in and replaced these teachers. And for students, these young black students, they lost role models. They lost older black professional role models that they could look to, people that came from their community, people that understood their community. And what I write about in the book is, is that process, but also that some of these young, idealistic Teach for America volunteers realise the situation they've put into and they began organising against it. So they went to these former teachers that had been fired. They went to the students and parents that were organising and they said, how can we support your struggle? And they formed an organisation called the New Teachers Roundtable that began organising against Teach for America from within. So I highlight the problems with Teach for America, but the ways that people are fighting back as well.

Ross You say that 'saviours are not interested in examining their own privilege. We don't want to see the systems of race and class and gender that keep us in comfort where we are in the right jobs and neighbourhoods and schools are the same systems that created the problems we say we want to solve'.

Jordan Flaherty Yeah, exactly. It's so much of it is about is about systems and about challenging systems. And I think the whole system of charities and nonprofits is a really good example of this. 60 percent of US nonprofits see their mission as serving communities of colour. Sixty three percent say that diversity is a key value of the organisation, yet 93 percent are non-profit chief executives, 92 percent of their boards and 82 percent of their staff are

white. Thirty percent of non-profit boards are entirely white. And I like to quote Jay-Z, who's sort of an unlikely source on this, but he says, 'To some degree, charity is a racket in a capitalist system, a way of making our obligations to each other optional and of keeping poor people feeling a sense of indebtedness to the rich, even if the rich spent every other day exploiting those same people'. That's from his book, Decoded.

Ross Would you agree with the American economist Henry George when he says charity is false, futile and poisonous when offered as a substitute for justice?

Jordan Flaherty Yeah, I think that's exactly right. I think charity, when it comes from this perspective of saving people, of helping people, there's that that old saying, right, 'If your liberation is tied up in my own, then come join in - I'm paraphrasing - but if you're just here to save me, then I don't need your salvation'. I think that was from an indigenous leader. But, you know, so I think that this idea of what charity is, again, has become this way of dictating to others. And we see it on a grand scale with the US, with US AID and foreign aid, right where our country uses foreign aid as a way of telling other countries how to manage their economic system, how to structure their system, even forcing them to buy goods from the US, right? So this charity comes as a poison pill?

Ross Well, this is all about debt driven or debt string driven diplomacy, isn't it? We're going to go and give you some foreign aid. We're charitable. We're wonderful and aren't we great. But here are the terms. And the terms are way, way worse than anything that other countries could have mustered on their own if they were self-sufficient?

Jordan Flaherty Yeah, that's exactly right. And I think it ignores how the rich countries and the rich individuals get their wealth right? Charity becomes this way of hiding it, of giving people what should have been theirs to begin with as an act of charity. I mean, the US role in Africa, right? That so much of the US wealth and Europe's wealth was built on the exploitation of the continent of Africa, of the people of Africans, and then we give charity to Africa. What about reparations?

Ross Jordan, you've highlighted the problem perfectly. And people who work in what's often called in the UK, the third sector, the charity sector and other places, have come across this hero complex, saviour mentality, repeatedly. How do we begin - after you've highlighted it - how do we begin to stop it? Give us some solutions, because this can't continue.

Jordan Flaherty Well, I think the key question is the question of accountability. So I think for anyone that seeks to help other people, the question they need to ask themselves, is how are they accountable to that community? How are they listening to that community? I quote the words of the Zapatistas who say walking we ask questions. And there's some different interpretations of how to read that, how to hear that. But one way that I think about it is that as we take action, you know, we shouldn't get so frozen that we take no action. We should walk. But as we walk, we should ask questions and be willing to really change course in the process of taking that action. So what does it mean to take feedback from the community that you say you want to help? What does it mean to really listen to that community? What does it mean to actually change your actions as a result of that community? What does it mean to be led by that community that you say you want to help? Those are some of the questions I think

the people that want to do charity, that want to help, that want to stand in solidarity, that want to be allies, that we need to ask.

Ross Genuine enquiry. Really interesting. What's happened in the UK over the last decade, probably longer, is that celebrities have seen social issues, jumped on the bandwagon, got involved for three to five months at best, and then jumped off once they thought they've helped and actually left a huge vacuum. And then, of course, this movement, whatever it might be, the campaign, goes backwards from then on. They think they've helped. But the point is, they've never enquired. They've never really done the thinking. They've never really done genuine question asking to what the fundamental issues are. Is this what you're saying we've got to get rid of?

Jordan Flaherty Yeah, and that's exactly what we've seen here. And I think you see a lot of these celebrities that maybe come with the best of intentions, right? But they just don't have the experience. They don't have the advisors. They don't know how to do it. They just have a lot of wealth and want to throw it at a problem. And, you know, I applaud their desire to get rid of their wealth. I think that's a great desire. But I think this idea of accountability is not spread widely enough. And we see it across the spectrum. And in this moment of Black Lives Matter, that's been really exciting. We've seen a lot of celebrities stand up and actually put their bodies in the street, which I think is really exciting. And I think that the voices of celebrities can be useful. And I don't want to just tell celebrities to shut up and do nothing, because that's not helpful. But I think that when they really listen to the community, when they're from the community, when they have some level of accountability to the community, that's when real change can start happening.

Ross Degan Ali, lovely to have you here on Renegade Inc.

Degan Ali Thank you for having me.

Ross Degan, you're sitting in Nairobi at the moment. We know the African continent from a demographic point of view. It's absolutely vital, young, bustling with energy and got such an amazing, exciting future ahead. When people from the West think about Africa, the default mechanism is how can we help? How how can we send aid, not least because we've seen Live Aid concerts and all sorts of charity initiatives to say that the global north should go and help the global South, specifically Africa? Why do you think that narrative is so prevalent?

Degan Ali I think that narrative actually has a lot to do with media, imagery, the entire structure of the aid system where we've been led to believe that our taxpayers in the global north, that our tax money, is really saving Africa. The underlying story of how we have actually impoverished and looted Africa is not something that the average taxpayer knows about. All they see is this band aid concert events for famine victims. They see images of children that are hungry, black children with flies on their faces. The whole architecture has perpetuated a white saviour mentality. And this idea that we in the north sitting in Ohio or sitting in London are responsible for these people are here to save them and we're doing such good work and all of that. But what they don't know is one hand gives and the other hand takes even more. And that's the story that's not told that actually the West has exploited Africa, not just only from slavery, from colonialism, that our gold, our minerals, our raw materials, are every single day exploited and trillions of dollars in other ways leaves the

continent far more than the aid that the taxpayer gives in USAID programmes or NGOs or UN programmes.

Ross Famously, Desmond Tutu said that the West brought the Bible to Africa. When the African people were closing their eyes and praying, the West stole the land. And land, in that sense, also encapsulates, of course, raw materials, minerals, et cetera. Is that a fair depiction?

Degan Ali I think that the depiction is actually more sinister than that. I would say it's not just the land, it's how the global economy has been set up. One of the things that Ambassador Arikana Chihombori-Quao, the former EU ambassador to the US talks a lot about, is the 14 former colonies of France. Many people don't know - including myself - how the tentacles and the strings of colonialism still exist with these countries. Many people don't know that as part of a condition of getting their freedom and getting their independence, they have to agree to some conditions, one being that they would not hold their reserves and their hard currency in their central banks, in their own countries but they would be sitting in the central bank in Paris. How many people know that? The other thing they don't know is that they have a right of refusal. The multinational French companies have a right of refusal for all government contracts. So if you want to construct a road, you have to give the first right of refusal to French companies. The other condition that they made them sign onto was that they had to have bases in their countries. So they had to allow basically your former colony continue to occupy you and have a military presence in your country. Who would allow that to happen other than by force? And those are the conditions that were set in place to allow them to get their independence. But really, there's no real independence. These 14 countries don't have any financial monetary independence. They're still under the yoke of neo colonial financial systems of France. And France has all control. And if you are president and you try to have independent policy for the best interest of your country, you basically get assassinated. The French have been behind about 22 assassinations in the continent. And that's a fact. And people don't want to hear these facts and they call them conspiracy theories and all of that. But that's what happens. That's the reality. So so I would say it's much more sinister than what Desmond Tutu has depicted.

Ross Isn't it interesting that whenever you read, or whenever I read, the best rated or the most highly rated comments, often on right wing papers and outlets here in the U.K., one of the first things, if the articles ever about slashing benefits in the UK, Universal Credit, or whatever it might be, handouts to the poorest in this country, the top rated comment every time, you can bet your bottom dollar is, cut foreign aid. Now, the likelihood is that the people voting for that and the people making that comment don't understand, again, the mechanics of foreign aid and how ultimately all that aid has to be paid back with compound interest, which ultimately makes the initial investment look like small beer.

Degan Ali OK, first of all, let's understand these Bretton Woods institutions, these IMF and World Bank institutions. I'm sure there are economists who are much better at describing all of this. I'm not an economist, but these Bretton Woods institutions were created just at the time of independence and the West or the north knew that this was going to happen. Independence was just around the corner. Look at the governance mechanisms. The power still lies in the hands of the former colonies in the US. It's not one country, one vote. What happened is post colonialism, many of these countries were getting independence and they had very, really sound economic policies. For instance, the governments of Zambia have very

strong food subsidies in place. And these food subsidies - obviously it's the same food subsidies that Europe has to protect its farmers. It's the same food subsidies that the US has had to protect its farmers. Many of the countries post-independence had those food subsidies in place, but they were told to get these loans, to develop your infrastructure, to make these investments in your health and education and all of these things that you need, you have to stop these food subsidies. So they were forced to stop these food subsidies as a condition to take out these loans with massive interest. And, by the way, pre-loans, pre IMF World Bank, they were actually having huge investments in their health and education. They were actually going down the right path of development. Now, years later, fast forward, you get a drought in Zambia and you have a famine happening in Zambia. And then this foreign aid system goes in, the machinery, goes into work, and you start FCDO, UK Aid or DFID or whatever it's called, starts giving funding to the UN agencies to Save the Children, to Oxfam to support the poor people in Zambia who are experiencing this famine. But what was the underlying root cause of the famine? Why is it that Zambia had a famine? It's because they were forced by design, by these Bretton Woods institutions, as a condition of taking these loans to stop their food subsidies. It's OK for you in the global north to continue to have these mechanisms in place, but it's not OK for us. And these are the really big issues that are at hand in new negotiations of the WTO. Africa, for the first time since independence, has finally had an African wide trade agreement. And they really now just need to stop, step it up and negotiate as a bloc with the European Union and with the US and all of these things. And I'm really scared that we're going to continue seeing the system operate in a way to ensure that Africa doesn't have a level playing field. We're not asking for aid. We're just asking for a level playing field. That's what we need. We need the system to not be rigged against us. And that's currently what it is. We don't need aid. We can develop on our own as long as the trade, the financial and monetary policies are fair.

Ross Have NGOs, non-governmental organisations, have they become part of the problem?

Degan Ali Yes, with 100 percent certainty, including my own organisation. I'll give you an example: Adeso pioneered cash transfers in 2003. We were one of the first organisations to suggest that instead of taking the Iowa grown food into Somalia, into a place that doesn't eat wheat, these communities eat rice. It's not culturally appropriate to give them wheat. And they had a serious economic crisis. The local economy stopped functioning in these droughts because there was a high debt burden. We understood the local economy. We understood how pastoral economy functions, and we understood that what was needed was cash to be circulated in the local economy and people to pay off debt and then they would pay off the traders and so on. So we said we need to put cash into this local economy. We don't need to put food aid. The food was being given to the animals. The people weren't eating it. And so we pioneered for cash transfers and we were ridiculed and called crazy. How do you bring cash to a place like Somalia? People will spend it on guns. They will spend it on drugs and all of these antisocial behaviours. Anyways, none of that happened. Cash has been extremely successful. I would like to say in 2021, I regret now what has happened, because what has happened is because the aid community can't get their act together, they don't have a standardised registry, they don't have a standardised way of registering people based on a set criteria across the country. We are seeing situations where people are disincentivised to go back and farm in the breadbasket of Somalia. They stay in the capitals waiting for NGO X and NGO Y and UN agency X to give them a cash transfer. And sometimes they're double, triple, quadruple dipping. Are they bad people for doing that? No. They're making smart

decisions. They're making sophisticated decisions. It is the fact that the system is completely inept and can't get their act together that we cannot solve this problem. We don't also have the mechanisms in place to incentivise and say, I'm happy to give you that cash transfer, but you have to go back to your farm and you have to be there for at least two years and show me two, three, four harvests and then you discontinue and cut the cord. But they cannot get their act together and do that because the system is either humanitarian or Somalia is a fragile context. We can do development. We we cannot start thinking about three, five year programmes. They cannot design innovative programmes. They are constantly talking about innovation, but they can't really innovate. And so we have this system where we actually are creating a system to make sure people don't farm and don't go back to the breadbasket of Somalia.

Ross Degan, people will hear your analysis and agree with it. What you seem to be saying, though, is that the current system isn't working. The aid system isn't working. The NGOs are exacerbating these problems. What are you asking for - a whole new system of aid to come in which levels the playing field? What is the ultimate outcome for the development of Africa as a continent from your point of view?

Degan Ali I'm asking and pleading the young people, the educated people in Africa, to wake up and realise that the system is rigged against us. We are not the problem. Corruption is an infinitesimal amount of the problem. And the corruption, I'm sorry to say, is perpetuated by the north. There is corruption that exists that takes place every single day at the hands of global north institutions, multinational companies that want to extract resources from our countries, and they give out large bribes to our government people. So what we need is to develop a movement and our own revolution and hold our governments accountable, stand firm on demanding the global governance systems to be one country, one vote, that the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, that we need to have equal space at the table as everybody else, that we cannot be overwhelmed and overpowered by the global north interests, and that we need to understand that we are just demanding justice. We don't need their aid. If we have this level playing field established with these Bretton Woods institutions and governments that act in sovereignty and independence of global north pressures and the best interests of our own people, we don't need aid. We can say no to USAID. We can say no to DFID. We can say no to all of that. It's the private sector that will lift people out of poverty. It is the industrialisation of the continent. It's factories. It is all the things that have been done in Asia, that have been done in China. This is not rocket science. But we are not given the opportunity to do that because we are just simply seen as a source, a very important source, of raw materials for the West. And they don't want us to be the producers of our own chocolate to compete with Switzerland, they just want to extract the cocoa from our countries. The problem we have is the global north and NGOs, have become complicit. They have become money making institutions. They are multibillion dollar entities who are looking at expansion and who are in bed with their donor. How do you say no to DFID and hold them accountable for their trade policies or all these other things when your biggest source of funding is DFID. How do you do that? You can't bite the hand that feeds you. So this is a real conundrum that they are facing. They really have to choose sides at some point and say, are we real civil society? Are we really in solidarity with the global south or are we just going to continue perpetuating the status quo?



Ross Degan Ali, your truthful analysis on all this has been really refreshing. Thank you very much for your time.

Degan Ali Thank you for having me.