

Nov 04, 2016 by [Simon Anholt](#)

Bono, Public Diplomacy and 'Brand Africa'

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From the May 12, 2006 Dallas Business Journal:

In Dallas for a talk presented by the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth, rock star Bono advocated more U.S. aid to Africa as a means of diplomacy and preventing terrorism. "Public diplomacy at its core is really about branding," the U2 singer said. "But the American brand isn't at its shiniest. The neon is crackling." ... At the Genesis Women's Shelter's annual Mother's Day Luncheon, former President George H.W. Bush was knocked out by a spirited invocation delivered by the Rev. Dr. Sheron Patterson of Highland Hills Methodist Church. "I might become a Methodist, if you keep going like that," Bush joked with Patterson from the podium. Then he added: "I'm one of the 'chosen frozen' -- an Episcopalian."

Interesting that Bono is using this language, because I don't think he quite realizes the enormous branding power that he wields over Africa – and it's far from positive.

Africa suffers from what I call "continent brand effect": because there is so little public awareness and knowledge of the individual countries, every country on the continent apart from South Africa ends up sharing the same reputation. Even a relatively prosperous and well-governed nation like Botswana ends up sharing perceptions of violence with Rwanda, of corruption with Nigeria, of poverty with Ethiopia and of famine from Sudan.

And Brand Africa, with its simple message of ongoing catastrophe, is promoted with skill, dedication, creativity and vast financial and media resources by aid agencies, international organisations, donor governments and, most prominently, by aid celebrities like Bob Geldof and Bono. Every time such a celebrity appears before tens of millions of TV viewers around the world to make another impassioned plea on behalf of the continent (usually represented by a black logo in the shape of Africa), he is building the brand image of Africa, not as 53 countries in various stages of development and struggle for independent existence and identity, but as a uniform, hopeless basket-case.

This image is absolutely ideal for generating charity, of course, but with each additional promotion, it becomes harder for places like Botswana, their companies and entrepreneurs, to break free of these negative associations and start to build a competitive identity of their own, or to inspire anything more useful than pity.

This kind of negative branding is the hardest of all to criticize, because it is so plainly done with the noblest intentions, and because it does as much good in the short term as it does harm in the long term.

Take Nigeria, for example. Lagos ranks at or near the bottom of most of the categories in the City Brands Index

, but this is hardly surprising, since it is the least well known and least visited of the 30 cities in the Index, and has no world-famous landmarks, personalities, events or achievements. This creates a kind of perceptual vacuum, into which a wide range of generalized African imagery tends to flow. By far the leading association with Lagos is "war," mentioned by 11 percent of our respondents, an unusually high percentage by any standards; the same percentage, in fact, that associate the United Nations with Geneva. The Biafran War ended in 1970.

I'm giving a speech at the World Economic Forum in Cape Town next week on this subject, titled "Why it is time to abolish 'Africa'" - and by "Africa" of course I mean "Brand Africa," that big, bad, hopeless continent brand that ruins the chances of so many well-run African businesses and African countries. Africa urgently needs to be perceived as 53 individual countries, each one better known for its real, individual characteristics, competences, talents and assets. I don't think it's going too far to say that until this issue is widely recognized, and until the governments of each African nation start to take their brand management and public diplomacy responsibility seriously, human and economic development in Africa will remain elusive.

It would be a wonderful thing if Bono could turn his considerable branding firepower onto that task. Anyway, it will be interesting to see how the WEF crowd responds!
