

Commentary

The Global Citizen Festival in Accra

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The Global Citizen Festival was held on Saturday, September 24, 2022, in Accra, Ghana and also in New York city, U.S.A. In Accra, the Black Star Square was the venue for what some have described as the biggest entertainment event of the year. The night was filled with performances by global music stars including SZA, Usher, Sarkodie, Gyakie, Stonebwoy, Stormzy, TEMS, and Uncle Waffles, with surprise guest artists including Pheelz, Oxlade, Yaw Tog, Tiwa Savage and Kwesi Arthur. The tenth edition of the festival was hosted by Danai Jekesai Gurira, the Zimbabwean actress, with co-hosts Berla Mundi, Jocelynn Dumas, Michaela Coel, Nomzamo Mbatha, and Sabrina Dhowre Elba from within and outside Ghana. The Ghanaian artist, Stonebwoy, opened the night singing “Run go,” a song about poverty, environmental destruction, and exploitation. The song aptly captures the sentiment of the Global citizen festival. He sung: “after making our motherland a bitter place to live/ tell we where we gonna run go.” Apart from the performances, the night included speeches from world leaders, government officials and activists as well as slick video adverts of corporate supported initiatives and global citizen campaigns. At the end of the festival, Global Citizen announced that commitments to the value of \$2.4billion had been made to “End extreme poverty NOW” with \$440million earmarked for initiatives to end extreme poverty in Africa.

Global Citizen, also known as the Global Poverty Project (GPP), was co-founded by Hugh Evans, Simon Moss, and Wei Soo in 2008 in Australia. It states on its website that “Global Citizen is the world’s largest movement of action takers and impact makers dedicated to ending extreme poverty NOW.”¹ The annual Global Citizen festival coincides with the UN general assembly, to get governments, business leaders and philanthropists to make policy and financial commitments aimed at ending extreme poverty. [Global citizen echoes Live Aid and Live 8](#) strategies of using popular music and celebrity activism to stage mega events to fight poverty, gender injustice, climate crisis and more.² To obtain a ticket, the festival requires individuals to earn points by “taking actions to fight extreme poverty, such as signing petitions, calling your political

1 See “Global Citizen Festival.” Retrieved from <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/info/2022/>

2 See “Hugh Evans: Being a global citizen.” Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/10/global-citizen-founder-hugh-evans-on-how-to-end-extreme-poverty.html>

representatives, participating in challenges, and more.¹ For instance, adding your name to an open letter to world leaders on their website is worth five points while recording and uploading a video for the #Act for Equality action—gender justice for women and girls— is worth twenty-five points. Participating in these actions makes Global Citizens “action takers and impact makers.”

Many Ghanaians commented on how well the concert was organized— it started on time, the sound and broadcast quality were world class.⁴ For many, the success of the festival was testament that the country could host a world class concert with world class production if the right amount is invested to hire qualified professionals, equipment and more. As some local cultural producers shared images of their participation in the event, it signaled that there were local professionals capable of top-class work. As such, Global Citizen was used to contrast some locally organized concerts that notoriously have bad sound quality and start late, usually with the main artists appearing well after midnight. There was some critical commentary about Usher bringing on stage three Nigerian surprise artists— Tiwa Savage, Pheelz, and Oxlade, further fueling the rivalry between Nigerian and Ghanaian artists in the popular entertainment industry. Yet he also performed with the Ghanaian dance group DWP Academy who had featured on Beyonce’s *Black is King* visual album.

One of the festival moments that generated a lot of discussion was the jeering President Akufo-Addo received while delivering his speech. Members of the audience booed, clapped and shouted “away.”⁵ In his speech, he noted the need to address climate change and also announced the Africa Prosperity Fund, a “billion-dollar African fund for Africans by Africans” (Global Citizen, Sep 28, 2022, 3:41:43). Alfred Thompson, a member of the ruling government’s New Patriotic Party (NPP), in reaction to the incident stated, “No matter how you disagree with your father, you don’t boo at him. It is totally unacceptable it is a bad culture we are adapting... we are marketing our country, we are selling something...it is a wrong act and a bad way of marketing your country” (GHOne TV Sep 27, 2022, 11:00). Some even stated that the opposition National Democratic Congress sponsored people to “boo” the president. Barely anything in Ghana escapes this kind of reductive partisan framing.

Nevertheless, this incident highlighted the frustration many have with the president and current economic crisis in the country. As the president stood on

1 See “End extreme poverty NOW!” Retrieved from <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/campaign/end-extreme-poverty-now/>

4 See “Our fundamentals are weak; lessons from Global Citizen Festival.” Retrieved from <https://cit-newsroom.com/2022/09/our-fundamentals-are-weak-lessons-from-global-citizen-festival/>

5 Audience members clap and shout “away” to often get people off stage when they are uninterested in engaging the speaker(s) or performers.

stage to share concerns about climate change, the paradox was apparent. The country was in the midst of a national crisis, gripped by the images of environmental destruction due to mining in Ghana, particularly illegal mining. Inflation was more than 33% in August 2022⁶ and, as at September 30, 2022, the cedi had depreciated by 37.5%.⁷

However, the Global Citizen concert is emblematic of the government's public relations drive to brand Ghana as a tourist destination—it was later revealed that Akufo-Addo helped ensure that the festival was hosted in Ghana and not Nigeria⁸— attempting to sell the image of the nation while failing to address local concerns of Ghanaians. Through the 2019 “Year of Return” targeted at African diasporans, the government successfully marketed Ghana as a December destination. Global celebrities such as Boris Kudjoe, Chance the Rapper, Vic Mensa, Lupita Nyong'o have visited the country in recent times. As part of the government's strategy to market the country, they have recruited Bozoma Saint John—former lead of Global Consumer Marketing at Apple Music & iTunes, Chief Brand Officer at Uber, Global Chief Marketing Officer at Netflix – as an Ambassador for the African Diaspora and Special Envoy to the President of Ghana. The government of Ghana has also entered a contract with Event Horizon Entertainment Limited, the organizers of Afro Nation, to host the Afrobeats festival in Ghana for the next five years.

An important point of contention many point out with these December events is that many young people in Accra are priced out by the December festivities. As well, the city becomes more congested due to the influx of foreign and domestic visitors. The government and actions of the president bring to sharp focus the contradictions of this public relations strategy targeted particularly at the US African American diaspora. While the president tweeted in solidarity against the killing George Floyd—and even received a standing ovation at Floyd's memorial service⁹— Akufo-Addo's security forces kill protestors with impunity. Recently, with glowing reviews about his governance in Ghana, he was invited by well-known African American preacher, TD Jakes to speak at the International Leadership summit held from March 31 to April 3, 2022 in Charlotte,

6 See “Ghana's inflation rate rises again; hits 33.9% in August 2022.” Retrieved from <https://citibusinessnews.com/2022/09/ghanas-inflation-rate-rises-again-hits-33-9-in-august-2022/>

7 See “Cedi loses 37.5% in value to dollar as of September 30, 2022 – BoG.” Retrieved from <https://www.myjoyonline.com/cedi-loses-37-5-in-value-to-dollar-as-of-september-30-2022-bog/>

8 See “Akufo-Addo ‘beat’ Nigeria to secure Global Citizen concert for Ghana – Okraku-Mantey.” Retrieved from <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/entertainment/Akufo-Addo-beat-Nigeria-to-secure-Global-Citizen-concert-for-Ghana-Okraku-Mantey-1630958>

9 See “Ghana, Akufo-Addo get standing ovation at George Floyd memorial service in US.” Retrieved from <https://www.myjoyonline.com/ghana-akufo-addo-get-standing-ovation-at-george-floyd-memorial-service-in-us/>

North Carolina.¹⁰ The incident at the Global Citizen festival speaks to how Akufo-Addo's international posturing draws attention to his glaring silence on local challenges.

The audience booed the president to hold him accountable— he has barely addressed the nation or engaged local media even in the midst of the crisis. Indeed, they were being “action takers.” Prior to his speech, Yemi Adamolekun, a 2022 Global Citizen prize winner, had stated “Global Citizens tonight I challenge you to occupy your office of the citizen and pay attention to the people that represent you and how they represent you... you must remind them that their duty is to act in your best interest” (Global Citizen, Sep 28, 2022, 3:03:02). Akuffo-Addo was being reminded that he was not addressing spectators but citizens who were frustrated with his governance.

However, the general post-festival commentary largely ignored the vision of change advanced at the festival.²¹ For instance, Global Citizen names extreme poverty but does not explain the historical context that produces and maintains poverty. It is difficult to ascertain who is causing the poverty. In the End Extreme Poverty NOW campaign, it defines the problem as such: “The world is facing global crises – we need leaders to act with urgency.” Then it calls on global citizens to “Add your name to Global Citizen’s open letter to end extreme poverty NOW.” The letter appeals to leaders to honor commitments to address global poverty. “Global Citizen demands action from governments and the private sector that enables developing countries to recover from the pandemic, close the \$3.5 trillion development financing gap, and help end extreme poverty, now.” What is evident is that it doesn't name systems of exploitation; their solution to these crises is funding and not dismantling systems. Admittedly, in another campaign, it calls out Big Pharma for not joining the African initiative to produce mRNA COVID-19 vaccines. It asks people to “Help send thousands of emails to big pharma directors urging them to put people over profit and support Africa’s vaccine hub.”

At the festival, some of the recorded speeches by prime ministers and government officials from the West echoed the dominant development narrative: benevolent superior developed countries needing to help the poverty-stricken developing countries. For instance, Emmanuel Macron states “...we have to fight hard against the consequence of the war and against all the existing and

10 See “President of Ghana Joins T.D. Jakes’ International Leadership Summit.” Retrieved from <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/president-ghana-joins-t-d-140000299.html>

21 A panel organized by Girish Daswani with Mutombo Da Poet and Bright Ackwerh titled, Booing is Caring: Mutombo da Poet on #GlobalCitizenFestival and Ghana, critiqued aspects of Global Citizens activism Retrieved from <https://www.africaproactive.com/blog/booing-is-caring-mutombo-da-poet-on-the-global-citizen-festival-and-ghana>

future inequalities and fighting hard means unlocking billions and mobilizing our energies and our finance towards poor country to deal with climate change (Global Citizen, Sep 28, 2022, 1:10:21). The numerous references to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was also telling as other crisis, such as the ongoing widespread protests in Haiti and Saudi Arabia's devastating war in Yemen, seemed not to register similar concerns.

In a 2010 paper examining the conceptualization of poverty and human development in the Global Poverty Project (GPP), now widely known as Global Citizen, Obeng-Odoom observes that GPP used the capabilities approach which does not name the causes of poverty. Rather, it describes poverty as a "bundle of deprivations" (Obeng-Odoom, 2010, p.123). As he notes, while poor people lack access to healthcare, credit, and education, it does not mean they are impoverished due to these characteristics. What the capabilities approach fails to consider is the exploitation which occurs between countries, which necessarily makes poverty a political issue. One must recall, that developmentalist policies of newly independent governments were met with resistance from the West because it challenged Western government's ability to access cheap labor, raw materials and consumer markets (Hickel 2017).

Global Citizen has been impactful— for example, with advocates in Canada, they pushed the government to announce more funding for equitable distribution of COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines.¹² Yet, upon a closer look at the campaigns, there does seem to be a depoliticization of challenges caused by the global political economy. As Jason Hickel has pointed out, we need to move from charity to justice so that we can challenge the power imbalance in the global economy to address the drivers of poverty and inequality. A 2016 report from Global Financial Integrity (GFI) and the Norwegian School of Economics, showed that since the late 1990s developing countries were essentially net creditors to the rest of the world.¹³ What this means is that the flow of money from poor countries to rich countries is more than what flows in the opposite direction. This occurs through external debt repayment, repatriation of profits from multinational companies, trade misinvoicing, same invoice faking etc. (Hickel 2017).

In conclusion, the post-festival commentary of Global Citizen largely did not engage with the platform's definitions of underdevelopment and the solutions it proffered. This speaks to the way pleasure, entertainment, and activism while impactful, can obscure and legitimize ideological positions that continuously fail to help us understand the causes of poverty, and more importantly, the actors

12 <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/global-citizen-how-drive-impact-advocacy-interview/>
13 <https://gointegrity.org/report/financial-flows-and-tax-havens-combining-to-limit-the-lives-of-billions-of-people/>

who maintain and benefit from the system.

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