

Moving beyond aid - the Obama parade



By [Jillian Reilly](#)

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Jillian Reilly is one of 20 speakers who will be sharing an 'idea worth spreading' on the TEDxCapeTown stage on Saturday 20 July as part of TEDxCapeTown's 2013 'Amazing People, Crazy Places' event.

Do I admit that the whole Obama in Africa parade sort of passed me by? That I didn't anxiously await the arrival of my spiritual American leader back to his birthplace? I didn't line the streets of Cape Town, waving my tiny made-in-China American flag, hoping to get a glimpse of the man and admire the swish and sway of Michelle's bangs?

Having lived and worked on and off in southern Africa for over twenty years, I have experienced many previous African visits by American presidents. Too many. They've left me more embarrassed than enthralled. Too many ceremonial trips to symbolically **GOOD** or **BAD** spots, announcements of version 4.0 of American largesse, platitudes about upliftment. Someone always ended up wearing traditional African dress. Wake me up when it's over.

But then someone sent me a [YouTube clip of Obama's speech at the University of Cape Town](#). I opened it up, as background noise really as I organised play dates for my five-year-old to fill the seemingly interminable school holidays, whilst also jotting down notes for my talk at [TedxCapeTown](#) on 20 July 2013. Yes, this is how we working mothers roll.

Moving beyond aid

Soon enough, something happened. I looked away from my mobile and started watching and listening. Look, I wasn't rapt to the screen or feeling the heat of pride across my face. But I didn't cringe. Once. Because Obama talked about moving beyond aid to form real partnerships for development. Hell, he spent more time talking about Africa's potential than its problems. And I wanted to shout out, "Hey, Mr. President, that's just what I'm saying in my TEDx talk! Maybe you could extend your stay? We could compare notes?"

For a brief moment I even allowed myself to imagine significant reform to international aid within my lifetime.

Now for the bad part: Obama still felt the need to announce some grand **WE WILL FIX YOU** scheme. Electrify Africa! Let there be light! Does every presidential visit have to include the reveal of some bling, bling - gazillions of dollars - helping everyone all over the Africa scheme? Maybe when you're a president of the United States, the answer is yes.

I don't know whether Obama will ever light up Africa. But I actually didn't cringe during one of his speeches here. Once. And that feels like progress.

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ABOUT JILLIAN REILLY

Jillian Reilly (@changingview) is a writer, speaker and consultant with over twenty years experience working across the developing world. Her book, *Shame: Confessions of an avid worker in Africa*, was published last year. She will be speaking about the failings and frustrations of international aid at TEDxCapeTown 2013. For more info, go to www.jillianreilly.com

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