



## Film | Heart of the Congo

Tom Weidlinger. *Moira Productions*. 57 minutes.

Reviewed By Dave Gilson

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*Heart of the Congo* is a clear-eyed examination of humanitarian aid in action. In the aftermath of the five-year civil war that killed 3.5 million people, filmmaker Tom Weidlinger traveled to eastern Congo last spring to shadow a team of European and Congolese aid workers trying to create a measure of stability in a region that's been rocked by a century of exploitation, corruption, and bloodshed. It's a tall order, to say the least, and their success is measured in modest victories: opening a health clinic, saving an infant from dehydration, drawing a bucket of clean water from a new well.

The film centers on a couple of scruffy, chain-smoking aid workers with the French NGO Action Against Hunger: Mariona, an engineer, and David, a nurse. Though the pair are deeply sympathetic, *Heart of the Congo* does not depict them or their fellow expats as saviors. When French nurses publicly dress down their Congolese colleagues, Weidlinger astutely observes that they're following a colonial "script that was written long before they were born."

As a documentarian, Weidlinger also honestly examines his own inability to connect with the destitute Congolese who sit in front of his camera. As he zooms in on their gaunt faces, they wonder why this rich Westerner doesn't offer them anything in return. And when he falls ill with malaria, the filmmaker is airlifted out. It's a reminder of what really divides the Congolese from their Western partners: When the going gets tough, the First Worlders always have the luxury of escape.

A burst of violence confirms the fragility of the aid workers' accomplishments, but *Heart of the Congo* manages to close on a less-than-dire note. As another round of rebuilding begins, David reflects, "I tend to react to all this like the Congolese.... If you have to go backwards, you back up and go forward again. If you stop and think about it too much, you can't move forward." There are no quick fixes here, just slow, necessary steps toward a more hopeful future.

# A different film about international aid in Africa

**I**N THE spring of 2003, Bay Area filmmaker Tom Weidlinger found himself in a remote outpost of war-torn eastern Congo, sick with malaria and pneumonia. Unlike the people whose lives he was documenting on film, Weidlinger had an option: He could be airlifted to a hospital.

That realization marks a turning point in Weidlinger's film "Heart of the Congo," which premieres Friday in San Francisco.

With his movie, the filmmaker says he hopes to move beyond stereotypical iconography of poor, starving Africans and the cliché of saint-like aid workers and ask the question: How effective is international aid in helping the people it claims to serve?

While working in Africa, Weidlinger was impressed by the effectiveness of Action Against Hunger, a group working in more than 40 coun-

## TAKE NOTE

tries to combat hunger, malnutrition, physical suffering and other distress endangering people's lives in emergency situations such as war, conflict and natural disaster.

The film's 8 p.m. premiere is the centerpiece of a fund-raising evening for Action Against Hunger. Following the film is a dessert reception and a conversation with Weidlinger, author Adam Hochschild ("King Leopold's Ghost") and Anne-Sophie Fournier, executive director of Action Against Hunger-USA.

The evening concludes with the Congolese dance music of Samba Ngo, an acclaimed recording artist who scored "Heart of the Congo."

The event is at the Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. Tickets are \$35 for the screening and other events, \$10 for the film only. Call (415) 392-4400 or visit

[www.heartofthecongo.com](http://www.heartofthecongo.com).

— Chad Jones

# Berkeley Filmmaker Discovers 'Heart of the Congo'

By LEWIS DOLINSKY  
Special to the Planet

Berkeley filmmaker Tom Weidinger wanted to make a documentary about international aid workers fostering self-sufficiency rather than dependency. In 2003, Weidinger visited Action Against Hunger and stifling heat, scorpions and malaria-carrying mosquitoes in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. He decided he had come to the right place and found the right people.

The result is *Heart of the Congo*, which will be shown at Herbst Theatre in San Francisco on Friday at 8 p.m.

After the screening, Adam Hochschild, author of the best-selling *King Leopold's Ghost* about the Congo and the newly released *Bury the Chains* about Britain's abolitionist movement, will moderate a discussion with Weidinger and Sophie Fournier, Action Against Hunger's U.S. executive director.

Then, Congolese singer-songwriter Samba Ngo, whose music is heard on the film's soundtrack, will perform. Tickets are \$10 for the film, or \$35 for the whole event, including wine and dessert. All proceeds go to Action Against Hunger.

The latest estimate of deaths in Congo from war, disease and starvation is 3.8 million in the past six years. That's 15 times the number who died in the tsunami disaster, for which AAH is a major participant in relief efforts. That's also a lot more than died in Rwanda, even in a genocide, or in Darfur, so far.

As a friend, I was aware of Weidinger's mission from the beginning, suggested possible topics (luckily my advice was rejected) and received sometimes grim reports by e-mail while he was well beyond the world of telephones.

My concerns were: Would the day-to-day activities of aid workers in an unattractive section of a faraway country turn into an interesting narrative? Would Tom actually live through the experience? (He got malaria and pneumonia.) Can you really complete a documentary by turning the cameras over to your subjects as you are being evacuated to a hospital in South Africa?

The hour-long film speaks for itself. Western and Congolese aid workers feed children who are heartbreakingly malnourished, but other children race joyfully through a nearby village. Wells are dug, because clean water is a basic need. Hygiene is taught. Nurses are trained. Fake nurses are discovered. Clinics are set up. Clinics are pillaged.

In Congo, there are highs and lows, and one has to adjust. Sometimes, the colonial master-servant relationship reasserts itself. Tempters flare. Requests are made for gifts that, as a matter of policy, cannot be given. The gulf between those who have nothing and those who have "everything" is evident.

Always, there is the shadow of terrible history—of Leopold's atrocities and



Health Program Director David Dolédec, above, with two young patients. A right, a man hauls earth from a well shaft under construction at Misso.



Maria Prudentina

Mobutu's dictatorship, of civil war and invasion. The current state of affairs is neither peace nor war.

"The most important thing we can do for the Congolese is give them courage," says an aid worker, referring not only to violence. He is talking about facing the future in a harsh land where tomorrow is not guaranteed. The adage "teach a man to fish..." is applicable. Action Against Hunger establishes clinics; Congolese will run them.

Two experts stand out in their dedication, competence and grace under pressure—the engineer Marionna Mirel and the nurse David Dolédec. They also help to complete the filming. And once in a while, they even kick back. It is a reminder that they are young and that they are not Mother Teresa.

Before *Heart of the Congo*, Weidinger made documentaries about transition in Czechoslovakia (After the Velvet Revolu-

tion), bullying (*Boys Will Be Men*), collaboration between American and Vietnamese theater companies (*A Dream in Hanoi*) and the civil rights movement (*The Long Walk Home*). I asked him what effect he would like his latest film to have.

Weidinger replied, "I hope the film will encourage people to think more critically and more deeply about the issue of humanitarian aid. As a result of the Southeast Asia crisis, there's a tremendous outpouring of goodwill and concern. I hope that some of that concern can be transformed into a more sustained awareness of the need to respond to hunger and extreme poverty worldwide.

"Humanitarian aid shouldn't be just about feeding people. Charity should be linked to change—to helping people toward a self-sufficient future. We need to get away from aid which is just a Band-aid,

which is primarily politically motivated and which is too easily derailed by donor countries' political and strategic interests or, conversely, by corruption among the power structure of the recipient countries."

Berkeley resident Lewis Dolinsky is a former editor and foreign affairs columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle.

**The Heart of the Congo**  
8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 28 at the Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco.  
Advance tickets: \$35 for film and reception; \$10 for film only. (415) 392-4400 or [www.cityboxoffice.com](http://www.cityboxoffice.com) or [www.tickets.com](http://www.tickets.com)  
[www.heartofthecongo.com](http://www.heartofthecongo.com)

## UnCommonEvents

**RUNNING ON EMPTY.** Action Against Hunger's screening of *Heart of the Congo* includes a reception with director Tom Weidlinger followed by a break-loose dance party to the music of Congolese singer/songwriter Samba Ngo ([www.samba-ngo.com](http://www.samba-ngo.com)). Fri., Jan. 28, Herbst Theater, 401 Van Ness Ave. at McAllister, SF. Screening at 8, reception at 9, dance at 10pm. Film only, \$10. Reception and film, \$35. For tickets: (415) 392-4400 or [www.cityboxoffice.com](http://www.cityboxoffice.com). [www.heartofthecongo.com](http://www.heartofthecongo.com)

## alerts by deborah giattina

### Documentary on Congo relief

**Friday, Jan. 28,** attend the premiere of *Heart of the Congo*, a documentary by local filmmaker Tom Weidlinger about the challenges relief workers face in helping Congolese refugees become self-sustaining. A dessert reception and live Congolese music follow the screening, which benefits Action Against Hunger. 8 p.m., Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness, S.F. \$10 for film, \$35 for film and reception. (415) 392-4400, [www.cityboxoffice.com](http://www.cityboxoffice.com).

## EVENTS

### ACTIVITIES

#### FRIDAY

**HEART OF THE CONGO: DOES INTERNATIONAL AID HELP?** A documentary film screening and reception to benefit Action Against Hunger ([www.aah-usa.org](http://www.aah-usa.org)). After the film, participate in a conversation about humanitarian aid with filmmaker Tom Weidlinger, Action Against Hunger-USA's executive director, Anne-Sophie Fournier, and author Adam Hochschild. The event concludes with Congolese dance music performed by Samba Ngo. 8-11 p.m. \$10-\$35. Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Ave. (415) 392-4400.

## PRAISE FOR HEART OF THE CONGO

“Most of the images we see from Congo are of death and destruction...but this unusual film shows us something else as well: the process of trying to help a community rebuild. With uncommon honesty and no sentimentality, it shows both the difficulties and the absolute necessity of creative humanitarian aid projects in a country recovering from catastrophe.”

— Adam Hochschild, author of *King Leopold's Ghost*

“Having lived and worked in Democratic Republic of Congo as an humanitarian aid worker I could identify with everything portrayed. The juxtaposing of Congolese and expatriate perspectives and also of historic and current events, has brought us a very real vision of the trials and tribulations of humanitarian intervention.”

—Andrew McKenna, United Nations Office for Humanitarian Affairs, Kinshasa

“*Heart of the Congo* represents the incredible challenges and hardships facing the Congolese in light of impacts of ongoing war and the legacy of a brutal colonialism. The film lays a great foundation for a further dialogue about international aid, and the necessary support for structural changes within the Congo. The Congolese know that only through courage and perseverance on a day-to-day basis can true progress be made.”

—Katie Sternfels, *Grantmakers Without Borders*

“*Heart of the Congo* accurately captures the real lives and the personal stories of the people working in international development in Africa, both the foreign nationals and the local people. It tells those stories in the context of the larger cultural and political realities and manages to tell a story that finds good reason for hope, endurance and perseverance in a hard situation.”

—Kevin Jones, *The Anglican Malaria Project*

Tom Weidinger asks the right question about an international aid group in the Congo, and by implication all do-gooders everywhere, and that is how do they get the recipients of their largesse to take back their destinies after they have gone? This heartwarming but unsentimental documentary suggests an answer to that tantalizing question.

—Phillip Fradkin, author and former foreign correspondent of the *LA Times*