

# Fight Song

STORIES OF ACTION DURING THE PANDEMIC



## ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO

FOUNDER, BATONGA FOUNDATION

In 2017, Grammy Award-winning icon Angélique Kidjo's Batonga Foundation incorporated soap-making lessons into its education and mentorship programs, which currently serve nearly 4,000 girls and women in her home country, the West African nation of Benin. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, those skills have taken on a new urgency. Kidjo has now shifted the organization's focus toward raising \$25,000 to help those girls not only make soap but also set up hand-washing stations, distribute protective face masks and broadcast radio messages about COVID-19. The initiative is providing critical supplies to Benin's hardest-to-reach communities, while also helping women develop entrepreneurial skills in a country where 34% of girls are married by age 18, according to UNICEF. Kidjo, a UNICEF Goodwill

Ambassador since 2002, also collaborated with the organization in April to release a cover of South African star Miriam Makeba's 1967 hit "Pata Pata" — meaning "touch touch" in Xhosa — with new lyrics about social distancing. Kidjo explains how Batonga (which accepts donations at [batongafoundation.org](http://batongafoundation.org)) is adapting its mission.



### MY FIGHT SONG

"ONE," U2

"Because we are all one."

When there is a crisis like this, women are at the forefront. The girls that I reach out to come from the poorest communities, and no one pays attention to them. But they are going to be the agents of change. Three years ago, we asked them what they needed, and the first thing they said was that they wanted to manufacture soap.

They are thinking at-large about themselves and their community. With COVID-19, they are the ones we train through the phone. They are the ones on the local radio, saying, "Wash your hands. Don't touch your face." They are working with the head of the village. They came up with the idea of putting out fountains for people to clean their hands. Those girls are transforming villages where the government doesn't have the time or means to go. When we started Batonga [in 2006], that was my goal: "I will ask you what you need and help you be self-sufficient."

We haven't raised as much as we want yet, but people have really responded and realized that COVID-19 doesn't know boundaries. This is teaching us that we need to think deeply about our role. If you have money, that's where you have to invest it. If we want to live longer and leave an Earth to the next generation, we have to sacrifice things. My grandmother always told me, "When you help someone, you don't wait for a thank-you. You do it because you have to."

—AS TOLD TO TATIANA CIRISANO



1. Kidjo in Paris on May 12. 2. Kidjo with members of the Lionel Loueke Trio after a performance at Carnegie Hall in New York on Dec. 13, 2019. 3.-4. Kidjo distributed TOMS shoes for the Batonga Foundation x TOMS Shoes partnership initiative and helped make soap in Benin in October 2019. 5. From left: Kidjo, Usher and Sheila E. backstage at Harry Belafonte's 93rd birthday gala at the Apollo Theater in New York on March 1. 6. Kidjo won best world music album for *Celia* at the 62nd annual Grammy Awards at the Staples Center in Los Angeles on Jan. 26.