

Book Reviews

*Sustainable Development in Third World Countries:
Applied and Theoretical Perspectives.* Edited by Valentine Udoh James,
Westport, Connecticut, Praeger, 1996, xvi + 245p.

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Africa seems to have a peculiar capacity to attract preachy and prescriptive analyses based on anecdotal evidence, overgeneralization, and a morbid pathologisation of the continent and its peoples. The book under review fits the bill. Its title is even misleading: first, the book is largely about sub-Saharan Africa, indeed, many of the chapters focus on Ghana and Nigeria; second, the developmentalist decrees that litter the text do not add to 'theory', let alone a coherent and comprehensive study of Africa's environmental and economic conditions and challenges. One would be forgiven for mistaking many of the chapters for half-baked newspaper articles.

The book begins quite promisingly. James, the editor, tells us that he was inspired by

conversations with development experts at the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research... I then decided that the time was appropriate for a collective book that would bring together a multidisciplinary group of scholars, educators, development practitioners, international experts, and professionals who could discuss the issues of sustainable development from a holistic perspective (xiii).

Alas, except for a lone Nigerian expatriate, he did not see it fit to include those who had inspired him, let alone other African scholars, nor was he troubled that he wrote six of the thirteen chapters. So much for the 'multidisciplinary group'. As for the 'holistic perspective', it becomes less evident the more one ploughs through the sermonising simplifications of African histories, societies, cultures, economies, and environments.

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In two rather repetitive chapters (2 and 6), Warren sings the praises of indigenous knowledge systems, the new metaphor for 'traditional' know-how, which needs to be appropriated for the crisis-ridden and contested developmentalist and environmentalist projects. Following his cue, Lamb (Chapter 9) seeks to draw planning lessons from haphazard African economic historiography, principally that 'there is a basic continuity in Africa on agriculture. If this is accepted as a conclusion and acceptable as a basis for further research, then continuing and resolving planning issues may portend something other than further choices over intensification' (p.141). McCorkle (Chapter 3) enumerates the symbolic and sacred, social and secular roles of animals in human life in order to tell us that 'it is foolish – and also highly unscientific – to embark upon the design of strategies for sustainable animal agriculture without investigating' all these meanings (p. 39). Burayidi (Chapter 4) evaluates an irrigation scheme in Ghana and advises that for irrigation to maximise its contribution to sustainable development in Africa 'irrigation companies should develop performance measures for farm activities so that outcomes can be measured against set standards' (p. 57). In their assessment of health projects, also in Ghana, Prince *et al.* (Chapter 8), plead for more effective collaboration between the donors and recipient countries and for the former to be more patient, to 'appreciate more proactively that development program-project problems of a country like Ghana, even if one focuses only on the health, population, and nutrition sectors, are complex and have a long history' (p. 123). And after a litany of Africa's developmentalist failures and telling us that 'Africans are their own worst enemies' (p. 162) solely responsible for the anarchy, carnage, civil wars, and famine ravaging the continent, an embittered Edoho (Chapter 11) concludes:

More than ever before, sub-Saharan Africa needs transformation. A fundamental change in policy direction is a desideratum.... New development policies and strategies should not be replicas of the past. Africa's development future has to be willed (p. 166).

Development is reduced to the voluntaristic magic of *willpower* unmediated by the agency of social movements and class projects and unconstrained either by historical processes or external forces.

James reaches the same conclusion. Warning that 'the natural systems of many African countries are on the brink of collapse' (p. 63) because of its poverty and destructive 'slush and bum' agricultural practices. In Chapter 5 he admonishes that these 'countries need a broader definition for their development goals – one that requires a perspective that incorporates social, equity, and environmental issues and is measurable on tangible and intangible levels' (p. 78). In Chapter 7 he rightly cautions against the dangers of hazardous waste exports to African countries, a subject he repeats in Chapter 10, where his discussion of the importance of self-sufficiency to African countries is reduced to cataloguing the role of continental organisations, such as the OAU, ECA and ADB, and ends with the earth-shattering discovery that local participation is crucial to realise the goal of self-sufficiency. In a later chapter (12), he sees salvation in tourism, in the continent's 'spectacular wilderness', and counsels: 'In order to sustain the tourism industry in Africa, it stands to reason that the political, economic, and social nexus must be sustained and stabilised' (p.189). What does that mean? And in the last chapter (13), he inexplicably shifts focus to the impact of British rule on Nigerian towns and cities and asks: Did it produce a sustainable planning style? The answer: no. The solution: incorporate indigenous methods of planning and resource allocation. How? By persuading the misguided elites. Development as a morality play, divorced from political economy, an enterprise blissfully free from the social structures and struggles of history and the unequal global commons.

Thandika Mkandawire recently reminded us that 'Social science is at its worst and most banal when it turns prescriptive'.¹ This book is a sad example of that.

¹ Thandika Mkandawire, 'Social Sciences in Africa: Breaking Local Barriers and Negotiating International Presence', The Abiola Lecture, 39th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, San Francisco, 23-26 November 1996, p. 14.