

Book Review

Handbook on Society and Social Policy

By Nick Ellison and Tina Haux (Eds.)

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A book of six parts, comprising 39 chapters including conclusion, with contributions from 51 academics, must surely be daunting to put together. Besides, as Nick Ellison and Tina Haux remarked in the introductory chapter, “putting together a volume on a subject area as vast as ‘society and social policy’ would be no easy matter at the best of times if only because difficult choices have to be made about the areas and issues to include and exclude.” I could not agree more. What was excluded in a handbook on ‘society and social policy’ is evidently clear: social policy in sub-Saharan African countries. All that is laid out on society and social policy in the introductory chapter, can hardly be said not to apply to countries in Africa south of the Sahara. For example, globalisation; this also affects sub-Saharan Africa, even more so than in western societies.

So, what explains the non-inclusion of countries south of the Sahara, if ever there was any in ‘collecting’ the papers (for they are conference papers) and putting them together into a book form? Well, we know as a matter of course that where many are gathered to reflect, share ideas, present research work and pontificate on complex issues requiring explication, in most of such cases, the gathering boils down to a meeting of a network of people probably well-known to one another one way or the other. A volume on issues that ends up as *Handbook of Society and Social Policy* would scarcely be far different from what has just been stated. I stand to be corrected. Be that as it may, this volume is a welcome contribution to the field. The editors, Nick Ellison and Tina Haux must be commended for their effort. To be sure, the volume is an overview of the field, but this hardly robs it of whatever strength it possesses – quite many of the contributors go beyond providing an overview, one can safely say, notwithstanding the editors pronouncing it as such.

So, what is the contribution of the handbook to the field that will make us momentarily suspend our critique of its conspicuous neglect of sub-Saharan Africa? The book has six parts as mentioned earlier. These parts contain different themes in the field of social policy and it is in the discussions of these themes that the contribution to the field

becomes evident. Driving the contributions, at the outset, is the engagement with conceptual issues in the field. As a matter of fact, it is inconceivable that one engages in social policy analysis without discussion of poverty, inequality and related theme; having these themes in the first part of the book reflects its direction in subsequent parts and the strength of the book. It is well structured as far as the discussions of the themes go. Well known significant variables in the study of inequality and social policy such as class, gender, religion and faith, race and ethnicity, the issue of disability and generations form the discussions in Part II. Part III dwells on contemporary welfare systems. Here, Africa, south of the Sahara is conspicuously out of the picture. We did speculate about the reason for this earlier.

Pensions, employment, social care, housing, education, child and family policies and the criminal justice policies, are the issues of concern in Part IV, followed in Part V by the mechanisms with which these issues are dealt with in terms of delivery. Part VI, the final part, takes the reader to a journey of challenges to social policies that might impact state capacities in delivery.

It would be difficult to argue against the point that this book is a handbook on society and social policy aimed at readers in the Global North. Chapter 20, on Middle East and North Africa by Rama Jawal, is not in itself sufficient a chapter to say otherwise. Of course, there is nothing wrong with the audience of a book. The critical point is the continuous omission of Africa in scholarship that deals with universal issues at a general level such as in the handbook. The question here is: can the discussions of these universal issues as in some sections of the book be said to be a product of “unconscious bias” regarding scholarship from Africa? This is an open question; however, a good example is the discussion of globalisation in the introductory chapter: the havoc wrecked by globalisation and its accompanying western imposed structural adjustment of the African economies which threw wide open these economies to the global North was barely mentioned despite the voluminous literature on it by scores of African scholars such as Adebayo Olukosi, the late Thandika Mkwandere among others. Well, the book has its usefulness, the omission pointed out here notwithstanding: for readers in the Global South, they are the wiser for their knowledge of society and social policy in the Global North. The bottom line is that it is a handbook and fulfils what is expected of a handbook: a piece of reference work intended to provide ready reference on a special subject matter.