

Book Reviews...

Kiyala, J.C.K. and Harris, G.T. (eds.). (2021). *Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa in the Anthropocene*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, pp.xxxvi+580. ISBN 978-3-030-95179-5 [ebook]

As the above details show, this is a long title for a long book and perhaps both need a word of explanation. While the term 'Anthropocene' is used freely in its own dedicated circle of scholars, for newcomers to the literature it will, inevitably, raise its own questions. In the words of Hans Guenter Brauch, the series editor in which this new publication appears, 'the *Anthropocene* represents a major shift in Earth history as a result of the direct intervention by humankind into the earth system and nature'. A recognition that human development has an impact on the world's environment is, in itself, hardly novel, whether intervention has been light in the form of traditional hunting and gathering systems or, more obviously, the heavy demands presently made by a global population fast approaching eight billion. What is revelatory, however, is that the cumulative and accelerating rate of this process of intrusion has resulted in a qualitative change in the nature of the environment itself, in climate as well as the surface of the planet. So much so that the impact is now transformative, akin to a new geological phase in the world (not unlike the effects of former Ice Ages). Hence the advent of the Anthropocene.

Given this fundamental shift in the balance between people and nature, causing everything to be reassessed, it is not surprising that a book on an aspect of peacebuilding in sub-Saharan Africa requires space for arguments to be developed and examples given. Thus, in close to 600 pages, the editors, Geoff Harris and Jean Chrysostome Kiyala, along with a range of individual contributors, provide a unique coverage of the subject in both theory and practice. Both editors work in the International Centre on Nonviolence at Durban University of Technology, a source over many years of action research in this field, related especially to situations in the middle and southern half of the continent.

At the core of the book are anthropogenic reasons for environmental crises, not least of all (but by no means only) climate change. Having set the scene, the aim is then to examine interventions by civil society organizations across the continent and to see how effective they are. There are, of course, stories of self-inflicted crises resulting from human frailties but also messages of hope. Human development is double-edged, displaying on one side inputs of

avarice and egotism with little or no thought for the future; yet on another dimension one can also see belated and, increasingly, inventive forms of response. Against the background of a worsening environmental situation, a common desire to reverse trends and find ways to survive is proving a positive force in itself.

The two editors have chosen to group the various chapters into four parts. In the first of these, civil society organizations are introduced as key players in peacebuilding in the Anthropocene. The chapters in this section include an important analysis by the series editor, in which he points to a range of inter-related problems and their propensity to sow the seeds for conflict. During the rest of this century, such problems are likely to become more acute. To respond to this challenge, Brauch calls for what he calls an ecological approach to peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

The second part comprises a wide range of micro-level case studies, drawn from across sub-Saharan Africa and tapping into different traditions of peacebuilding. Topics range from empowering women to engage in peacebuilding in a district in Zimbabwe, to an honest appraisal of the limited powers of civil organizations in preventing conflict, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Elsewhere in this section, there is a report on peace clubs in schools as a way of encouraging non-violent approaches to conflict situations, and a case study from South Sudan in which action research is used to build the capacity of civil organizations. Fascinating though these are, there is perhaps a case for a narrower but more analytical selection, teasing out common elements and focusing more sharply on what they mean for the theme in question.

Then, in the third part, attention switches to macro-level case studies. This is a smaller collection, with just two case studies, compared with twelve at the micro-level. In fact, the two papers in question are each full of interest. Kiyala himself explores the subject of how child soldiers can be guided back to a more peaceful way of life. In doing so, he points to traditional mechanisms, such as *baraza* in the Democratic Republic of Congo and *gacaca* in Rwanda. In turn, the second chapter in this section is more process-oriented, showing how various African institutions are directed to securing a more peaceful continent.

Finally, the spotlight is turned to the task of enhancing the role of civil society in peacebuilding. An important point is that external, often international, organizations may well have their own agendas and that it is better, where possible, to allow more communally-based bodies to play a leading role. That is an important lesson that can be applied to other global topics too.

Undoubtedly, in a book of this length there is a wealth of ideas and practical experience to reflect upon. Different readers will take from it what they will. It might seem churlish,

therefore, to carp about what seems, to this reader at least, to be missing. Personally, I would like to have seen a more focused explanation on how the human impact on the environment can lead to an increase in conflicts in this part of the world, and then how the peacemakers get to work. Too often in current debate, there is an inference that it is all about climate change. But, important though that is, it is only partly a result of human impact and there are, in any case, other environmental situations which pose, in some ways an even greater challenge.

One of these is the still-burgeoning world population, especially in Africa. It is not always fashionable to draw attention to this, even though it so obviously adds pressure on an already overworked environment. Wars in the past have habitually been fought over scarce resources and this will surely be even more apparent in the future. Not least of all, food security will be high on every nation's agenda, if not at the very top. Conflicts will occur in relation to limited supplies of farmland and water, fish stocks in the ocean and a right to clean air. Even the universal challenge of climate change could be more effectively addressed if there were fewer people living in vulnerable coastal areas, and if the constant demand for food were to be reduced because of smaller numbers.

In a book of this scope, it is not surprising that additional questions are raised. There are no set boundaries to the subject, which is itself evolving. Thus, it is to the credit of the editors of this pioneering volume that readers will themselves be stimulated to extend the boundaries. Such is the collective experience of seeking new ways to understand our very complex world.

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