

REVIEW

Democratic Reform in Africa: Its Impact on Governance and Poverty Alleviation

Muna Ndulo (ed)

Oxford: James Currey 2006, 304 pages

As democratic reforms have gathered pace around the world since the early 1990s and more states have acceded to internal and external demands for greater accountability, transparency and legitimacy in their governance practices one issue, possibly more than any other, has been interrogated by academics and policy-makers: does democracy benefit economically the lives of citizens?

Although this question has prompted sharply divergent discourses at the macro-economic level, nowhere in the world are the merits and/or demerits of these arguments more clearly witnessed than amongst the many African states which form the majority of the poorest countries in the world. Repeatedly in discussions with local African traders, housewives, farmers, and workers, one question seems to recur: what tangible benefits has democracy brought us?

Many of the contributors to *Democratic Reform in Africa: Its Impact on Governance and Poverty Alleviation* either directly or through related discussions attempt to deal with this simple yet elusive question. There are sufficient controversies and debates about the topics of governance and poverty alleviation to fill several volumes, let alone one 304-page collection, but this book makes a clear and important contribution to these debates.

The volume is edited by Muna Ndulo, presently Professor of Law at Cornell University and a Director of its Institute for African Development. Contributors include: Penelope Andrews, Douglin Anglin, Reginald Austin, Joel Barkan, Kate Fletcher, John Hatchard, Robert Kent, Johann Christian Kriegler, Thomas Lansner, Brian Levy, Colleen Lowe Morna, Daniel Manning, Ann & Robert Seidman, Peter Takirambudde and Tsatsu Tsikata.

The book begins with a discussion by Ndulo of the relationship between governance and the rule of law and their impact on poverty alleviation. From the introduction one concludes that the book's primary focus is methods and means which either assist or hinder poverty alleviation and, for the most part, this holds true. It is a tacit assumption throughout much of the book, however, that poverty alleviation is an accepted and commonly understood concept, as the major themes of the book focus almost exclusively on the practices and policies of good governance and, even more specifically, on the rule of law in African states.

While some of the chapters deal almost exclusively with governance issues and practices and their impact on economic development, others focus more on

economic theories and/or myths that are prevalent in the discourse on poverty alleviation. There is a chapter by Tsikata on Ghana as a case study of a success story, and a fascinating chapter by Levy which develops a framework for analysis of the sustainability of the current systems of governance in 21 African states, arguing strongly that existing deficiencies need to be addressed or a number of these governance systems may ultimately collapse.

There is the obligatory chapter on gender imbalances and their impact on the composition of those most affected by poverty – women, but Lowe Morna goes beyond the usual gender equality arguments and asserts that gender, which is a global issue in governance, is receiving more lively and appropriate attention in African states than in many other parts of the world.

The attempt, which is characteristic of several of the chapters, to go beyond contemporary discourse about an issue without deliberately creating controversy or arguing for the sake of being contrary, is what was ultimately most enjoyable about this book. The editing process has produced a publication worth noting for its depth of insight into multiple elements of the governance-poverty-alleviation debate, while at the same time raising new aspects for consideration and future discussion.

At the end of the volume, I realised that while my understanding of the complexities of some of the issues discussed had been expanded and deepened, I was also left pondering yet other questions. While for some this might represent a failure on the part of the authors to completely convince me of their arguments, I prefer to view it as a reflection of the merit of the topic and the integrity with which these multiple and complex issues are addressed in the book.

Few truly groundbreaking concepts are introduced but there remains plenty of value for the interested reader to mull over long after the book has been put down, making *Democratic Reform in Africa: Its Impact on Governance and Poverty Alleviation* an excellent resource for anyone interested in the current debates about African governance, democracy and the role these concepts can and should play in the alleviation of poverty on the continent.

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