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Book Review:

Poverty in Africa

Urban Food Systems Governance and Poverty in Africa, edited by Jane Battersby and Vanessa Watson, Routledge, 2019, 268 pages, 978-1-13-872675-8, \$150.

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Simultaneous urbanization and poverty in Africa set the stage for the research projects compiled in *Urban Food Systems Governance and Poverty in Africa*. This collaborative work is edited by Jane Battersby and Vanessa Watson and is comprised of a collection of research projects situated in the cities of Kisumu, Kenya; Epworth, Zimbabwe; and Kitwe, Zambia. Findings from these 28 studies offer unique insight into current and larger debates in the field of urban studies and urban governance in Africa, more specifically, the findings offer insight into how urban poverty, household food security, and urban policy are connected. This groundbreaking work seeks to close the knowledge gap for policy makers. The book strives to sufficiently equip decision makers with accurate data regarding the causes and consequences of what they see as a lack of dietary diversity and frequent food insecurity in urban cities. The research allows national and international decision makers to better recognize how programming, as well as the tendency to focus attention on rural poverty has been damaging for urban residents.

What makes this work more revolutionary is the way it analyzes lofty agendas for development that are presented by foreign donor agencies like the World Bank, the International Monetary fund, and their subsidiaries. Two of these agenda and programs are Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These agendas and programs, while well meaning, run the risk of impeding the progress of the populations they are meant to help and can subsequently impede the overall economic and social development of African nations.

The researchers reach conclusion by posing the question: What do the urban food systems in these secondary cities in Africa reveal about the dynamics of urban poverty and its governance? This research project innovatively tackles the question by analyzing the nature and scale of food insecurity in general. Through this process, they find that food insecurity in all the cities is high, with 71% reporting moderate food insecurity in Kisumu, 88% in Epworth and 90% in Kitwe. Further, they support the need for researchers to take into account the multidimensionality of poverty when developing poverty alleviation programs. The researchers urge that for poverty alleviation programs to work, they must factor the compounding effect and the interplay of inadequate access to water, sanitation, and energy on these populations.

In addition to producing valuable knowledge on the nature and scale of food insecurity, the work also examines to the role played by supermarkets in food systems. A finding worthy of note shown in this African context is the presence of supermarkets in these secondary cities has been found to be instrumental in mitigating food shortages. This finding is significant

because this is not the case in the U.S. context. While the U.S. is leading the developed world in innovations, technologies, and other advancements, the glaring absence of supermarkets in low-income communities and the resulting food insecurity in those neighborhoods is hard to miss. In this regard, the book also posits that food insecurity must also consider obesity as a form of food insecurity.

This work is radical which is exhibited most significantly by providing insight into the way food insecurity is historically tied to colonialism. More importantly, this work adds to the conversation surrounding the need within academia to embark on more collaborative and interdisciplinary work. This partnership is needed because work emerging out of academia tends to be discipline focused. While each academic field has merit, the downside is that the work produced tends to have a single-axis perspective and obscures others, or renders them invisible. For example, while this work programmatically makes significant contribution to policy makers by allowing them to conceptualize poverty alleviation strategies that work, the effort continues to gloss over the significance of the colonial process in creating poverty.

Having research that ignores the ways cities were built to keep Africans out, as well as the ways these cities were ill prepared to accommodate the influx of newly independent people makes us, as researchers, complicit in the problem. Some scholars claim that Africa was, and continues to be, underdeveloped for the purposes of keeping Africans economically, socially, and politically tied to the West. While research such as this points to the important issues of intersectionality, and that food insecurity is a starting point for understanding poverty in Africa, it goes without saying that capitalist, colonial, neo-colonial, and imperialist projects still stand at the root of how the cities were created in the first place and that poverty is not incidental. Food security is tied to poor infrastructure, as mentioned in the text, but also to land ownership.

Chigumira et al's essay in the book provides a more complete framework for understanding poverty and provides a more concise historical account of how the colonial process built these cities. However, they also place the burden of poverty equally on the colonial process and the failed political processes in Zimbabwe. I would therefore be remiss not to point out that this analysis glosses over the role of neoliberal policies in the creation of poverty in African countries.

To this end, Toriro's composition addresses the economic structural adjustment programs (ESAPs) as IMF and World Bank initiatives that Zimbabwe embarked on, as well as the impact these programs had on the economy. From a sociological perspective, a more critical analysis would critically engage with the downside of trusting the same organizations responsible for creating poverty in Africa with alleviating the problem they created. This is crucial because glossing over root causes of problems makes us complicit in exacerbating the problem. The World Bank and IMF are both large organizations whose economic structural adjustment programs are also largely responsible for poverty in Africa. These neoliberal policies, in addition to the continual exploitation and mismanagement of African resources and a lack of debt relief policies, are all issues worthy of serious consideration when it comes to governance and policy. Instead, as characteristic of any neoliberal policy, its failure is placed on the shoulders of those most impacted. The problem with ignoring these factors, topics tied to the ways Europeans created over crowdedness, as well as the fact that historically, Africans were stripped of power and also stripped of their sense of relevance, needs to be at the forefront of any conversation that seeks to move Africans forward.

In conclusion, this work is indeed on track to properly equip policy makers to effect informed governance decisions for “the poor.” My analysis adds that as scholars, our work must also seek to ask the tough questions surrounding the research in which we participate. Academics and activists suggest that as scholars, we ought to ask research questions that our participants are also asking about themselves. The book reviewed sets groundwork as a social justice project, and it is for this reason that I forward this suggestion.

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