Review


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Advocates for Change is a welcome addition, not least after a candid diagnosis of the ills that weigh heavily on African governments, economies and society as articulated in Architects of Poverty. The earlier book has as its main focus the causes of Africa’s poverty in the last 50 years and its likely culprits. The current collection offers, and refreshingly so, ways in which Africa can dig herself out of the political, socio-economic and developmental quagmire in which she currently sits. The volume achieves this through 12 different voices (framed respectively as chapters) not only of accomplished scholars, but also of individuals who have over the years gained experience and perspective through, inter alia, association with research institutions and other think-tanks, leadership in corporate sectors and in governments, and as heads in regional organisations and supra-national institutions, from COMESA (Common Market for East and Southern Africa) to the UN. While regions like Asia and South America are learning to maximise successfully their potential by tapping into economies of scale, utilising technological advantages to surge ahead and improve the lives of citizens and developing the productive sectors of their economies, Africa still grapples with the same problems (poor health, underdevelopment and unemployment, illiteracy) the continent was facing two decades ago. This volume, however, stands out from the cynicism that accompanies many debates on Africa’s development and progress. If the volume’s central idea is that something can still be done to set Africa on a path to socio-economic and political progress, its main strength lies in its coverage of a spectrum of fields that are also part of the
millennium development goals. Of value, though, is that the antidotes suggested are neither based on possible scenarios, nor from some purely theoretical standpoints. If the solutions being proffered for Africa’s problems are to carry any credibility, then those that suggest such solutions must speak from a pragmatic perspective, and Advocates for Change provides this through an array of contributing specialists who have considerable research and work experience on Africa’s problems (and progress) in their respective fields. As such, leaders of Africa, and all those who are interested in change, will do well at the very least to examine what the volume has to say about existing problems, and about some yardsticks of measurement for much needed change.

The prescriptive nature of Advocates for Change, however, highlights some of its limitations. Many of the solutions that have been applied to African economies, for instance, have failed because they have been prescriptive in nature. At the heart of previous failure was the assumption that what Africa needs to change was well-known. This volume at times evinces similar overtones. As a result, notions of leadership and possible change appear to be top down in outlook, so suggested solutions appear to be directed at the top echelons of politics, economics and society. This appears deliberate and a little disconcerting, since it is generally agreed that leadership and power, much as they cannot be ignored, are a big part of the problem that faces Africa. Moreover, any change can only take root if the powers that be consent. As a result, the volume appears to labour under the weight of an albatross. The suggested solutions may thus appear to carry with them a ceteris paribus undercurrent, where many of them may read as mere suggestions. The volume thus succeeds more in initiating a debate, rather than offering concrete solutions.

There is a contribution from L Amédée Darga describing Mauritius’ socio-economic success, which begins to detail what had to happen on the ground for political and economic decisions to be embraced and to bring success. This is instructive, but almost all other contributions are silent on what the communities themselves need to change in order for decisions to breed success. Whereas there is recognition, for instance, of the role played by the second economy as well as the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) sector in Africa, little is said about what role women – who largely drive the informal economy – could play in spearheading change and development. The introduction to the volume hints at what is missing in the rest of the book, such as action (including protest action) and possibilities available for
the economic foot soldier who ultimately is the face of Africa’s underdevelopment. Unless the role that the grassroots (particularly women) could play is at the very least recognised and highlighted, suggestions may continue to be misdirected.

The volume, despite its length, contains some common strands in arguments. The editor of the volume captures these in the introduction, including a gaping political and economic vacuum and a debilitating lack of power in all its forms. Nevertheless, in the subsequent eleven essays, the arguments centre more squarely on suggested solutions to put Africa back on the road to recovery. Africa’s endowment with natural resources can only translate to development if her economies can be diversified and developed beyond mere extraction. On the other hand, this can only be sustainable if her political stability is guaranteed through sound institutional foundations such as efficient state bureaucracies, non-partisan judiciaries, and social contracts. Many of the essays suggest that the colonial settler economy, which was designed to extract resources from Africa and get them out of the continent via the shortest route, still exists as reflected in an ailing physical and knowledge infrastructure of present day African economies.

However, a more general group of essays deal with the politics of change and democratic transformation in the African continent. Africa’s birthing process is incomplete; umbilical ties still exist with the empire to which the post-colonies are unwitting appendages. After some 40 odd years of independence on average, Africa has only succeeded in creating what Gilbert Khadiagala has called ‘democratisation on the cheap’ (188), also widely known as pseudo-democracies. Some structural inadequacies, such as an absent middle class, engender rich-get-richer, poor-get-poorer political and economic climates, where political elites become, in self interest, lethargic about strengthening political institutions. A multitude of problems result from this. The empire, feeling guilty for having done little for Africa’s democratic institutions, uses donor aid to fund political reform. This results in shallow, limited electoral reforms, and not sweeping constitutional ones. It additionally results in weak participatory and governance systems. Meanwhile authoritarian regimes are only interested in such electoral reform because the reforms legitimise their dubious rule, and anyway elections are bank-rolled from external sources. At the end, there are generally no incentives to improve home-grown participatory mechanisms.

Meanwhile, Sindiso Ngwenya provides a fascinating take on why strategies by Africans to stand up and be counted on the global economic and political
stage are self-defeating. The current nature of Africa’s regional integration takes the form less of countries that have a shared history of colonisation and more of an ‘amalgamation of countries that have strong economic and political relations with former colonial powers’ (252). Moreover, on the one hand, African countries still hold on to the principle of political sovereignty and mutual non-interference, while on the other they lack product complementarities (since they only excel in raw material extraction) that really underpin enduring regional integration. Attempts at regional cooperation are confronted by the fact that, as one of the book’s contributors, Thandika Mkandawire, observes, African countries are globalisers, and not regionalisers. African countries prioritise global trade and global integration at the expense of regional cooperation and regional trade; therefore divided they fall. Another political theme running through these essays on the politics of Africa is the need for domestic participatory and regional integration mechanisms based on sound democratic arrangements ‘within’ and ‘among’ member states. This could start with, according to Sindiso Ngwenya, the empowerment of the African Union and other regional communities with supranational authority to monitor and police national institutions.

Whereas fixing the politics sets the tone and direction for the continent, Africa’s progress issues are intractably socio-economic. Another set of essays suggests that solving the paradox of having many natural resources and very little beneficiation from them is critical. Africa’s natural resource potential, if properly developed and realigned, can ameliorate the myriad of challenges currently confronting the continent. The extraction of natural resources should be deliberately done in a way that most benefits Africa, which is the opposite of the current norm. Having the resources, such as Africa does, is similar to holding a stick by the thick end with little purchase on the handle. Resources should be used to develop adjacent capacities, including skills and human resource capital. Attached to this is Africa’s health challenge. For their part, Francois Venter and Helen Rees make a case for the link that exists between poverty, economic opportunity and health outcomes. Perhaps the most compelling argument is one that is presented by Mandivamba Rukuni, where he makes a case for future development that will be closely linked to agriculture. This is because not only does Africa possess vast expanses of productive land, but also because all developing and developed countries have recognised that agriculture is an important driver of economic growth and development. A fallacy that currently stifles agricultural growth in Africa is the idea that urbanisation means the decline
in the importance of agriculture. Again, without political will, development of research, credit, private sector cooperation, security of tenure, as well as the revival of traditional agricultural systems, it will be difficult to realise any meaningful development.

The more country-specific essays deal with all of the above themes in more depth. This is welcome, since a clearer picture of what the problems are and how they can be tackled is generated. David Everatt interrogates the relationship between politics, class and inequality in South Africa. Whereas the absence of a thriving middle class in a political system may result in authoritarianism, the growth of one tends towards democratisation. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in South Africa, where the African National Congress as a political party may be now facing a ‘generational ceiling’ (72) and the winds of political pluralism may already be blowing. Jonathan Jansen examines shortcomings of South Africa’s education system, and finds that, while South Africa is the biggest spender on education in Southern Africa, she has the worst outcomes. Political authority over schools will need to be restored back to central government, he argues, as this will help entrench a culture of learning through centrally and uniformly managed administrative, bureaucratic, accountability, capacity and knowledge systems. Concerning entrepreneurship, Mike Herrington observes that South Africa faces the dual problems of unemployment and a glaring lack of early stage entrepreneurship. The main challenges range from lack of requisite skills, training, collateral, mentorship, too much red tape, a lack of media coverage of the ‘good’ entrepreneurial stories, as well as insidious corruption. Perhaps more refreshing for this essay, and a welcome break from the general silence on gender within the volume, is the recognition of the role that women can play in the SME sector. Whereas it is known that especially in agriculture, the role of women will be crucial in driving development, this volume is largely silent in that respect.

The Mauritian story stands out as that of success, and serves as a reassuring reminder that socio-economic and political progress is not entirely elusive for the continent. Written off just four decades ago as ‘awaiting a bleak future’, and as having problems that ‘defy solutions’ (169), the island of Mauritius is now being hailed as Africa’s success story. It is unclear if the fact that this is an island is instructive on whether it is buffered, both in terms of sharing its model of success, and also in terms of not receiving the bad influences plaguing the continental mainland. What is clear; however, are some lessons that can be learnt from Mauritius’ success.
Another fallacy that has long been perpetuated by pan-African propagandists is that the petty bourgeois class is an evil vestige of the settler economy. What Khadiagala intimates in his essay is vindicated in the Mauritian success story; that ‘no bourgeois, no democracy’. The logic is simple, ‘democracies are built on middle classes embedded in systems of property ownership’ (189). These become resourced enough to not be ignored, and gain enough relevance to begin to dominate socio-economic spaces and to influence political decisions. In pursuing the goal of equal distribution of wealth in Mauritius, the petty bourgeois class was vital as a catalyst. This class, observes Darga, is responsible for many good things that the Mauritians have happened upon, including a thriving entrepreneurial class, a strong domestic market, ‘consociationalism’ – or the peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups (174), human capital development, good public-private partnerships, strong participatory institutions, and a presence of consultative processes in decision making. The outcome is unambiguous: ‘Mauritian economic and social success is no miracle. It is the result of how people and leaders managed their realities for the creation of wealth, and how they managed their wealth to ensure well-being – and here well-being also means the absence of conflict’ (183). For Mauritius, development was a ‘survival strategy against all odds’ (174) and desired social and economic outcomes catalysed the development and implementation of good policies. One aspect of the Mauritian example is the emphasis on how the people – the masses – contributed to their success. The leaders valued these contributions, and supported what the people needed and wanted to achieve, so that Mauritian successes were home-grown, grassroots based and locally initiated. The Mauritians were therefore not only involved in these programmes, but were also invested in their success.

What are the limitations of approaching reform and change from the elite perspective – constituted as it is by academics, economists, corporate leaders, and suggested to governments, public officials and other senior civil servants? And what are the drawbacks of adopting a scope such as has been taken by this volume? The size of this project limits the depths to which the discussions may have progressed. Proposed solutions appear pragmatic, even novel, but they are divorced from specifics that need to be addressed. If the South African education system needs attention, for instance, where may this begin? What forms may these solutions take in rural versus urban environments, and if at all, what could be some of the obstacles that may need to be addressed should there be challenges along the way? In the same vein,
if so much has been documented regarding Africa’s authoritarian regimes, and if donor meddling is the main problem, what challenges may related reforms face in specific countries, and what may some of the solutions be for those individual countries? Economic change and structural realignment are desirable. Economics being a terrain fraught with market jitters, sweeping changes as suggested in some of the essays may result in economic shocks. The example of Zimbabwe’s (somewhat extreme) sweeping economic changes, as well as their aftermath is fresh in the mind. If Africa needs to chart a new course, what are some of the ways in which shocks resulting from these changes may be absorbed? The volume is generally silent on the recent global economic volatility and possible effects it may have on Africa’s reform. Assuming that this has nothing to do with the continent may be uncomfortably simplistic.

Secondly, the problems that the continent faces have a long history. There is a glaring lack of comparative analysis in many of the essays that especially deal with issues of Africa. Although there is a glance at the different forms of government compromise such as Zimbabwe’s Global Political Agreement and Kenya’s Government of National Unity, a lot of the political problems, especially related to authoritarianism and donor funded electoral systems, have not been afforded a comparative perspective. Comparison not only demonstrates that two situations may be similar, but it also details differences, especially how solutions may work in specific situations and locales. A lack of comparison renders the problems ahistorical and proposed solutions not entirely convincing.

Thirdly, as the Mauritian example implies, any viable solution will need to involve the people whose problem it seeks to address. If entrepreneurship is an issue, it may be important to hear how the challenges are framed in the vernacular of the local people. This helps, again, with comparison, but also with an understanding of what forms the problems are understood to take, and therefore how they may be addressed. Especially since Africa is made up of a largely youthful population, and since Africa’s thriving informal sector is largely driven by women, it is unfortunate that no solutions appear to address these two important groups in the African economy. Mike Herrington’s finger is dead centre on the role that women may play in the SME sector. However, even he does not differentiate the various dimensions of the SME, such as agriculture, small scale mining and manufacturing, arts and crafts, and the service industries. Also no differentiation is made of the rural and urban economies, and how support for the SMEs may differ
between the two. Such omissions render the solutions almost half-hearted, and perhaps lacking in their ability to ignite real change and usher in progress. Despite these shortcomings, *Advocates for Change* is a fresh take on Africa’s challenges, a bold statement on the possibility for progress and sustained development in Africa. Covering virtually every important aspect of what is not going right in the continent, the volume suggests that if the right mechanisms are put in place, and enough political will is actuated, Africa can yet walk the path to success, a path other continents have walked and are continuing to walk.