A Bright Future? Regional Development in Africa

Walther, Olivier

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More than fifty years after the Organisation of African Unity was created in Addis Ababa, progress towards effective regional integration has been slow in Africa. Despite numerous charters signed and countless strategic frameworks drawn up on paper, many institutional and political obstacles remain to reduce the fragmentation of markets. On a continent divided into 54 states, agreements that should ensure the free movement of goods and people still have little effect on traders, who continue to rely on informal negotiations with state authorities, and on migrants and travellers who make their way across the potholed roads of the continent. While African politicians call for regional summits, the gap is widening between state elites and international
organizations who design macro-economic policies and local communities who practice regional integration on a daily basis.

In their recent edited book *Contemporary Regional Development in Africa*, Kobena Hanson and colleagues argue that the mismatch between regionalism as initiated by states and policy makers and regionalisation as practiced by local communities can best be reconciled by promoting the private sector. The general tone of the book is rather optimistic towards the future of regional development on the continent. “Africa is emerging”, argue Kobena Hanson and Vanessa Tang in their introductory chapter. What was called the Dark Continent is now full of “opportunities”, “possibilities”, and promised to a “bright future”.

The book convincingly argues that regional development is key to ensuring growth on the continent and to facilitating its embeddedness in global networks. By supporting the development of the private sector and helping local entrepreneurs, the authors argue, poverty should decline and a new middle class should emerge that will not only consume more but also uphold the principles of equal rights, democracy and good governance. The success of this program is, however, underpinned by a dynamic reform agenda that should ultimately unleash the “enormous potential” of African entrepreneurs. “New regionalisms and regional development”, the authors argue, “should enhance and accelerate Africa’s development if existing capacity problems and inefficiencies are addressed” (p. 8, our emphasis). A good part of the future of regional development in Africa relies on this “if”.

Written by academics based in North America, Great Britain and South Africa, and experts at international organizations and consulting companies, the 10 chapters of the book cover a particularly broad scope. Regional development provides an umbrella under which cross-border trade, foreign direct investments, infrastructures, innovation networks and value chains are discussed. Even Boko Haram, the jihadist group from Northern Nigeria, is entitled to a chapter.

*Contemporary Regional Development in Africa* certainly contributes to raising awareness within the scientific and policy communities of the largely unexploited potential of Africa’s regional development. Its focus on the private sector is very much in line with recent policy initiatives by the World Bank, the African Development Bank or USAID that seek to reduce trade barriers, support local entrepreneurs, establish transport corridors and joint border posts and, more generally, make the informal more formal. The conceptual framework of the book builds heavily on the new regionalist literature inspired from international political economy, which has convincingly demonstrated that regional integration resulted from the interdependencies between various geographical scales and between both formal and informal activities, and that the distinction between state and non-state actors was often blurred in Africa.

Yet it is regretful that the main conceptual contributions of the new regionalism approach have not been explored more systematically by the authors of the book. Few chapters address the micro, meso and macro scales simultaneously, for example. Similarly, the state-society nexus is ignored in most chapters, which mainly focus on formal arrangement or regional initiatives between states and private actors rather than informal initiatives between traders or the civil society. Another shortcoming is that examples of micro-regionalism mainly rely on secondary sources from the end of the 2000s published or edited by Söderbaum and Taylor or the OECD. The Maputo Corridor, the Parrot’s Beak, the Niger-Nigeria borderlands, and the Mali-Burkina Faso border are great cases of regionalism that are deserving of renewed study.

A more comprehensive study of the state-society nexus at the micro level would probably have contributed to document social and political dynamics that are directly linked to the “emerging and complex” economic issues discussed in the book. In many African countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal or South Africa, for example, the liberalization of markets tends to enrich large-scale merchants who have adopted global ways of entrepreneurship and accumulation while maintaining strong connections to the political elite of the country, rather than the small-scale traders that often live from the existence of border differentials. Transport corridors are another example of how public-private partnerships can impact the daily life of small traders across the continent, by making unrecorded trade paradoxically more difficult. The larger
question is that of the possible inclusion of a variety of traders and their contribution to regional development, something only hinted at in what is nevertheless an accessible read to academics and policy makers alike.

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About the author

Olivier Walther
Olivier Walther is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Southern Denmark and a Visiting Professor in the Division of Global Affairs at Rutgers University. Email: ow@sam.sdu.dk

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