Review III: Energy Poverty and Access Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of Regionalism

By:

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Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations facilitated the adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals ("the SDGs"), which articulate the aspirations of member countries for a sustainable future. Among the SDGs is Goal 7 – affordable and clean energy. Relevant to this book review, the SDG-7 targets include improving universal access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services, and enhancing international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology. The SDG-7 Technical Advisory Group of the United Nations, in its 2018 and 2019 Policy Briefs, revealed that Africa's renewable energy sources, with an annual investment of US$ 70 million, can generate 300GW by 2030. Thus, SDG-7 targets underscore the essence of countries at the international level to create policies and upscale policy implementation towards improving access to modern energy, as this measure is likely to be

much more efficacious than isolated efforts, or at least complement isolated efforts of countries in this regard. The role of the international community in achieving adequate access to energy and reducing energy poverty, particularly at the regional level, is the central theme of Dr Victoria R Nalule's book under this review.

Regional Cooperation as a Catalyst for Overcoming Challenges of Enegry Access and Energy Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa

When scholars talk about Africa's energy crisis, they actually refer to energy sector challenges, including energy access. Energy access remains topical because of its indispensable contributions to the socio-economic development of any given nation. International cooperation for this purpose appears to have been much more explored at the regional (continental) level than at the global level. Notably, while the role of the European Union (EU) in ensuring access to modern electricity in Europe has enjoyed much scholarly attention, the role of African regionalism in ensuring adequate access to energy appears to have been relegated to the background. Nalule's book (p.3) makes a significant attempt at illuminating the path of scholarly discourse about the role that African intergovernmental organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the East African Community (EAC); and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) can play in improving energy access in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

Furthermore, the book provides an in-depth and valuable analysis of the challenges of energy access and energy poverty within the regional level of SSA, as well as the role of regionalism in addressing these challenges. As the book observes, energy access is a major problem in the Global South, particularly developing countries in Africa and Asia. In the context of SSA, the book bases its assertion on projections made by the International Energy Agency (IEA) in 2014 that over 290 million people lack access to electricity in Africa. However, these statistics have changed for the worse as the IEA's Africa Energy Outlook 2019 now puts the figure at 600 million people, largely rural dwellers. As SSA countries struggle to close their respective energy access deficits, the book advocates that one viable strategy would be to leverage the unity of purpose at the SSA regional level to overcome energy access and energy poverty challenges.

Re-Defining the Concept of Energy Access and Similar Terms

First of all, the book complains about the heavy scholarly attention given to challenges of energy access, yet less concentration is given to defining the concept itself. The definition of energy access is germane to understanding its associated challenges and finding practical solutions. The book evaluates a few definitions of energy access as proposed by certain international bodies. Whereas the UN expands the definition of the concept to include access to modern energy (p.25), the IEA definition gives a different dimension of access to clean cooking facilities (p.25). The inadequacies of these energy access definitions stem from their inconsideration of access to other forms of modern energy apart from electricity. Thus, the book proposes a new definition of energy access as households, social institutions and industries having access to electricity and other forms of modern energy, including petroleum and renewable energy (p.29).

Albeit subtly, the book argues that energy affordability and reliability, though connected to energy accessibility, ought to be treated separately. This argument is plausible because there is no value in achieving access to electricity if poor people in SSA cannot afford it, and even where they can afford it, the supply is inefficient or unreliable. Some developed countries appear to have addressed the challenge of access and reliability and are now grappling with the challenge of affordability. In contrast, the three elements remain a considerable challenge in developing countries. Thus, energy access is just a third of a three-pronged super-concept of a sustainable energy future in SSA, and indeed globally, the other two-third being energy affordability and energy reliability.

Secondly, the book analyzes similar terms that can be used interchangeably with energy access. These terms include energy poverty and energy security. Energy poverty connotes a lack of access to modern energy services, a lack of reliability, and inability to afford electricity services (p.31). In contrast, energy security is the uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price (p.32). The book canvasses that, in the context of SSA, energy poverty is more relevant to energy access than energy security. Energy security already envisages the scenario where access and affordability have been settled, leaving out the issue of reliability. But in SSA, these three elements remain a

considerable challenge, and as such, African regional bodies should facilitate concerted efforts of member states to tackle them. This is one of the many salient recommendations proffered in the book.

Achieving Energy Access in SSA: Between Regionalism and Regionalization

From my study of the book, it is my understanding that the economic objectives of a region, including electrification projects, could be achieved by either regionalism or regionalization. Regionalism is understood to be the promotion of regionally-based policies and practices in given sectors (p.61), whether through mono-dimensional or multidimensional regional cooperation. On the other hand, regionalization can mean increased integration of countries within a region (p.61) by collapsing respective economies of these countries into one holistic regional economy, the EU being a typical example. However, the book expectedly toes the line of regionalism in achieving access to energy in SSA. The foundation for regional cooperation towards achieving access to modern energy in SSA has already been laid through grid-tied electricity infrastructures such as the West African Power Pool (WAPP), East African Power Pool (EAPP), and the Southern African Power Pool (SAPP).

The merits of regionalism in achieving energy access in SSA is quite significant. The cost intensiveness of electrification projects may be too much for one SSA country to bear, hence the need to pool resources together to lower investment costs and achieve common energy outcomes throughout the region. Again, there is a need to harness the vast energy sources of one country to provide electricity to other countries within the region that have fewer energy sources for socio-economic security. Despite unviable infrastructure, weak legal and institutional frameworks, inadequate finance and trust among member countries (e.g. Anglophone and Francophone factors) posing as barriers, the book insists that the above highlighted and other benefits of regionalism for energy access such as multiplier economic development, political trust, environmental sustainability, and transfer of technology amongst countries within the region, greatly outweigh certain downsides such as weakened political and economic sovereignty.

Regionalism, Energy Access and the Development of Fossil Fuels and Renewables in SSA

Africa is abundantly blessed with fossil fuel and renewable energy resources, but the challenge remains the inability to leverage these resources to provide optimal energy access. The book canvasses that regionalism, otherwise called regional cooperation, can be explored to address the age-long energy crisis in SSA. Despite the vast deposits of crude oil to address the challenge of energy access, SSA countries, especially Nigeria, keep on importing refined petroleum products from outside Africa. This is an opportunity for regional bodies to galvanize investments in refineries at the regional level to ensure the security of electricity and transport fuels and control of global petroleum supply, which will act as an absorber in times of global oil price fluctuations. The book also identifies natural gas as having huge potentials to complement the deployment of petroleum to provide electricity to households, businesses, and industries, and it urges regional cooperation to harness this resource to address energy access challenges.

However, the negative impacts of fossil fuel on the environment–gas flaring, $C0_2$ emissions and oil spillage–due to unsustainable exploration and development techniques have inspired the case for regional cooperation in the development of Africa's renewable energy sources to address energy poverty. Africa has vast untapped wind and hydro energy resources. In fact, the entire continent has huge unleveraged solar power potentials. These renewable energy sources have the double advantage of promoting access to modern electricity and mitigating the adverse effects of climate change, which the book refers to as the trilemma or nexus of climate change, energy access and renewable energy (p.106). As earlier noted here, the book observes that regional energy treaties within SSA have had little effect in driving the harnessing of renewable energy within the region, and there is a serious need for this ineffectiveness to be addressed. While the SADC Treaty provides for cooperation in the area of infrastructure and environment (p.132), theECOWAS Treaty provides for cooperation in the energy sector and environment (p.132). As is argued in the book, energy development–including renewables–falls under infrastructure, while in the latter, renewables can be argued to fall under energy sector cooperation which is expressly provided for. However, the drawback of both treaties is that they do not address in detail how cooperation in renewable

energy development and climate change mitigation can be achieved. There is, therefore, a need to put mechanisms and structures in place to engender renewable energy development in the region due to its potential in reducing energy poverty and enhancing energy access at an enhanced rate.

Concluding Thoughts

An in-depth study of the book shows that, thus far, efforts to achieve energy access and reduce energy poverty through regional cooperation among SSA countries is a mixed bag of successes and failures. While the treaties setting up ECOWAS, EAC and SADC have thus far encouraged cooperation among member countries to enhance energy infrastructure development with considerable successes, a framework reform is essential to reflect current issues regarding renewable energy development and climate change mitigation. However, the book postulates that to achieve energy access through regional cooperation, member countries would need to harmonize their respective national energy regulations to close regulatory gaps and ensure seamless cooperation in this regard (pp.160-162; 170-195).

I noticed that the book is silent on any meaningful programme for addressing energy access by the African Union (AU). This agitated my mind as my understanding of regional cooperation is one that occurs at a continental level, e.g. Europe or Asia. Instead, Nalule's approach in the book was to analyze the roles of ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC, which are, in reality, sub-regional bodies. This is in contrast with the role that the EU is playing at the European regional level rather than a sub-regional level such as Western Europe.

From the foregoing, would it be safe to conclude that the real groundwork of achieving energy access in SSA is currently at sub-regional levels – West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa? One of the flagship projects of the AU for the realization of the Agenda 2063 is to provide access to modern, clean and affordable energy by developing the Great Inga Dam Project to support existing 'regional' power pools. Still, it appears that the existing literature is scant on the role of the AU in energy access in Africa. Perhaps, this presents an opportunity for further research on how far the AU has come in galvanizing regional cooperation towards transitions and access to modern, clean and affordable energy in Africa. Notwithstanding, I highly recommend this

trailblazing book to African energy policy makers both at the regional and sub-regional levels.

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