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

By:

Leezola R. Zongwe

November 3, 2020

Nalule's book is a comprehensive critical analysis of the energy access and energy poverty issues that plague Sub-Saharan Africa ("SSA"). She conducts this discourse within the energy transition discussion and presents it through the lens of the sustainable development theory.

This book advances that countries in SSA face similar energy challenges; and that the energy access and energy poverty problem "not only persists but escalate in SSA", despite the several programmes that exist in this region that are working to solve this issue. This persistence of the issue is also the justification for why the book focuses on this region as opposed to the whole of Africa. To be sure, in 2018 – which are the latest records available – the World Bank estimated that only 47.7% of the SSA population have access to electricity.

Goal 7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”) is to “ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all”.[1] In this book, Nalule dissects this goal. She argues that this goal is in fact, central to achieving the rest of the SDGs. She succinctly summarises each goal and illustrates how achieving each goal will only be possible if goal 7 is achieved first, or at least simultaneously.

This book investigates the common energy challenges that persist in SSA. Nalule does a brilliant job of identifying and evaluating these challenges within the existing legal and policy frameworks. With the aim of this evaluation being to address whether these existing laws and policies adequately cure the mischief identified. The book focusses on the national frameworks of the individual countries in SSA; the three regional blocks within SSA, namely the East African Community (“EAC”), the Economic Community of West African Countries (“ECOWAS”) and the Southern African Development Community (“SADC”); and the international communities’ role as global partners in achieving the SDGs. The field research of this book adds a level of depth to it that takes it from purely academic to actionable policy recommendations.

Central to this book’s thesis is the definition and comprehension of “energy access”. Nalule goes into extensive detail about how this term is defined by leading international institutions, such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Energy Agency. She then advocates for the formation and conceptualisation of a new definition, asserting that this will better serve the quest to achieve energy access for all.

The definition advanced by Nalule unapologetically cuts through the jargon that several of the definitions that she interrogates is straddled with. It also clarifies the different phases that the current definitions have combined; and dissects the current definition to offer a new, more coherent definition.

Nalule identifies these phases as accessibility, affordability, reliability, and sustainability. Each of these elements must be defined separately and more importantly, each of them must be addressed separately. Moreover, there must be a separation between ensuring energy access for households and business. The reason for this is simply because there is a vast difference between what a household and what a business can afford with regard to energy cost. Primarily,

Nalule advances that when these issues are tackled separately in the definition, regulators and policymakers will be able to tailor-make the solutions to these issues and, in doing so, ensure that the methods adopted speak to the individual needs of each phase. The main solution, of course, is regional cooperation.

As such, the primary argument of this book is that SSA can solve its energy access and energy poverty crises through regional efforts because the efforts of individual countries have proved insufficient. However, the reason as to why these countries are unable to provide their citizens with electricity is not extensively addressed in this book. I think that answering this question would have added considerable depth to the book's preliminary chapters. Furthermore, I would have appreciated a more extensive discussion on the sustainability of Eskom, Africa's biggest power utility, which is shouldering more than a third of the continent's electricity demands while running on coal. Coal is known to be detrimental to the environment which goes directly against the tenets of sustainable development. In addressing Eskom's inability to remain profitable and sustain its output, this book could have added more value, in the form of lessons learned, to the projects that it advocates for in its recommendations. Finally, I wish that the international communities' role in achieving energy access was considered more broadly. A more in-depth look into this would have added more depth to the recommendation offered in this regard. For example, a more in-depth discussion on the political and economic influence that the international institutions that offer loans, financing and investment to the individual countries in SSA have in these countries (see Martin; Owen; and Woods),[2] would possibly have led to a more detailed discussion about the role that these institutions can play in ensuring energy access in SSA. Despite the absence of these assessments, Nalule does an excellent job introducing the economic and energy law positions of each of these countries before she tackles SSA's regional organisations' stance. She also draws extensively from international communities' initiatives for achieving energy access and does a brilliant assessment on which of these initiatives SSA can draw inspiration from.

Interestingly, while the book acknowledges that SSA is a paradox, in that although the region is affluent in both renewable and non-renewable natural resources the majority of citizens of the countries in the region live in abject

poverty and have no access to electricity, nowhere in the book does she discuss the ‘resource curse’. It is certainly refreshing to read a book about natural resources in Africa that does not go on an exhausting rant about the continent being plagued by the so-called resource curse. Instead, this book is solution-oriented from its introduction straight through to its conclusion.

Among the recommendations, Nalule argues for the establishment of an independent functional legal entity to regulate SADC’s energy sector. Additionally, she advocates for an “Energy Access Bill” that addresses “the need for regional energy cooperation including making provisions for the autonomy and independence of regional energy institutions” to be enacted by the EAC. Finally, she recommends that ECOWAS strengthens its “specialised institution mandated to coordinate the development of oil and gas infrastructure” by making it more inclusive. She suggests that this is done by encouraging its members’ active participation in the institution.

Nalule identifies duplication of efforts by various organisations and institutions as “rampant throughout the African continent”. In this regard, she calls for the establishment of an inter-regional organisation dedicated to ensuring energy access for all, similar to what has been done in Europe and Asia. She coins this organisation the African Energy Access Organisation, and suggest that its mandate must concern consolidating the efforts of the various stakeholders, innovating practical solutions and streamlining the numerous regional efforts to address energy access, such as power pools.

Nalule’s contribution to the existing literature is both original and significant. Her recommendations are well thought out and presented in an exciting and reasoned manner. Most noteworthy about her approach is possibly the level of thought she put in the feasibility and functionality of her recommendations; both those formally laid out in the final chapter of the book and those casually mentioned throughout the text itself. This book is a novel take on the energy access and energy poverty challenges perpetuated by poverty, poor governance by national governments, and ineffective regional and international cooperation in SSA. Nalule has certainly positioned herself firmly within the energy access discourse.

I do not only highly recommend this book to the SSA community, but also to other countries and regional blocks where energy access remains a problem. It is equally recommended to investors and potential investors in the SSA energy sector, and the regulators of the energy sectors in the individual countries of SSA. Lastly, scholars and activists of energy access will also enjoy reading this book and drawing from Nalule's recommendations.

---

[1] This goal is expanded on by three specific targets, of which target 7.3 is further subdivided into two sub-goals. These targets are, 7.1. By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services; 7.2. By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix; 7.3. By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency; 7.3. (a) By 2030, enhance international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology, including renewable energy, energy efficiency and advanced and cleaner fossil-fuel technology, and promote investment in energy infrastructure and clean energy technology; and 7.3. (b) By 2030, expand infrastructure and upgrade technology for supplying modern and sustainable energy services for all in developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States, and land-locked developing countries, in accordance with their respective programmes of support.

[2] See L.L. Martin 'Financial Institutions, International and Politics' in Gerard Caprio (eds.) *Handbook of Safeguarding Global Financial Stability: Political, Social, Cultural, and Economic Theories and Models* Academic Press (2013) 43. Also see, Roger Owen *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* 3rd ed. Routledge (2004). Also see, Ngaire Woods *The Globalizers: The IMF, the World Bank, and Their Borrowers* Cornell University Press (2014).

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

Provided by Afronomicslaw