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Continent of Mothers, Continent of Hope: Understanding and Promoting Development in Africa Today. Skard Torild. New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2003. 260 pp.

In this book, Skard draws on her rich experience working and living in Central and West Africa to recount the complex social, economic and political realities in the region. Skard carefully analyzes the overall development implications of conflicts, illiteracy and epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, with particular emphasis on women and girls. She reveals a wide range of institutional, ideological and cultural issues that have bearings on the ways in which development assistance has been undertaken in the region. Ultimately, the book is about effective and ineffective development interventions in Africa. The book argues for an unbiased and targeted development approach that ought to take into account the prevailing social, historical, cultural and political realities.

The discourse swings back and forth in history, from the slave trade and colonial exploitation to de-colonization and post independence governance, carefully scrutinizing their contribution to the prevailing crises in the region whilst analyzing their implications for meeting development objectives in the future. By drawing attention to some of the most deadly and brutal civil wars in the region and highlighting the appallingly violent attributes of these conflicts, Skard not only recounts the past but also challenges readers to ponder the future of Africa. For example, she briefly touches upon a crucial, and yet paradoxical aspect of peace building: the practice of rewarding rebels in an effort to end violence as was done in Liberia with Charles Taylor (p.19). Simultaneously, Skard reveals Africa's remarkable resilience amidst lawlessness, injustice, poverty, disease, and oppression. In particular, she sheds light on the often-understated role of women in courageously upholding the fracturing social fabric as a result of enduring hardships. Consequently, the book argues well for the meaningful and deliberate inclusion of women in the development process if peace and prosperity are to prevail.

Furthermore, Skard underscores the importance of fully appreciating the dynamics between traditional and modern values in the region before introducing new development approaches. Such understanding ensures that one builds on indigenous and positive practices rather than re-inventing the wheel. Skard supports this argument with examples of successful community and local initiatives such as Lemden Women's Cooperative in the arid Brakna region of Mauritania, which was founded in 1985 by local educated women (p.235). Despite the harsh environment and strong traditional and religious influences, the Women's Cooperative brought remarkable socio-economic and environmental improvements to Lemden village. Skard applauds the initiative and argues that with the necessary financial and technical support, such types of initiatives could transform the continent, even in areas dominated by men and tradition.

Drawing on personal experience, Skard makes note of a few successful development interventions in Central and West Africa sponsored by UNICEF. At the same time, she gives a detailed account of her leadership and managerial challenges within UNICEF that, in her view,

reflected a clash of culture between Westerners and Africans (p. 207; 208). Skard's interpretation of cultural clash seems to be confused with an institutional culture that, in my view, better represents the challenges described by Skard. For instance, problems associated with the local staff include the inability to dissociate business from personal affairs, nepotism and unpunctuality. The fact that the private sector operates within the same environment and cultural constraints and yet does not suffer from the same problems points to the institutional not cultural value of accountability and purposeful leadership. Just as the private sector adheres to these values to stay in business, the public sector can impart them to their host community as part of the development package rather than giving their tacit endorsement to unacceptable practices (p. 208).

Skard's attempt to pull together a wide range of peace and development issues in Central and West Africa in a succinct and engaging fashion is certainly the strength of this book. However, due to the sheer number of themes covered in this limited volume, some of the key points are addressed in an abrupt and superficial fashion including the underlying theme of the book - women and mothers in Africa. Furthermore, the book suffers from broad generalizations concerning 'Africans' and their 'culture' often based on isolated incidents, specific geographic locations, institutional culture and the decisions of unelected officials. This results in an incomplete and at times inaccurate portrayal of Africans and their diverse culture and history. For instance, Skard claims that in sub-Saharan Africa, Islam has spread from the north while Christianity came much later and penetrated slowly from the south (p. 184). This generalization is altogether erroneous when one examines the history of Ethiopia, a country that accepted Christianity in the fourth-century and has an ancient civilization including its own written language, still in official use. Despite criticizing donors for their lack of sophistication in handling diverse and complex development issues in Africa and the Western media for their stereotyped image of the continent, Skard is not immune to her own accusations. Although a few generalizations can be made regarding certain themes in Africa such as issues of governance and economic status, not to mention race, it is not only hypocritical but also intellectually shallow to generalize Africans with respect to their various cultures, religions, histories and civilizations.

Nevertheless, the book is particularly insightful for young and committed development professionals who are dedicated to fighting poverty and the unacceptable level of violence that still rages on the continent. Moreover, Skard's expert account of development politics and what it has and has not changed on the continent should be a good resource for researchers and junior and seasoned development professionals alike. While it will introduce new professionals to the complex world of development, it will provoke discussion and debate among others with more experience.

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