Book Review

Oche Onazi


According to the 2014 United Nations Human Development Report, 2.2 billion people are either near or living in multidimensional poverty. Oche Onazi’s book opens with Gutierrez’s definition of poverty ‘meaning death . . . the lack of respect for one’s human dignity, and the unjust limitations placed on personal freedoms in areas of self expression, politics and religion. Poverty is a situation that destroys individuals’ (Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (1974) p. 11). Onazi’s book is a welcome addition to the debate surrounding current market-based development strategies and the move towards human rights-based approaches to development. His central argument is that at the centre of current rights-based approaches to development is a misunderstanding of the structural crises that have engulfed African states. This then raises questions about whether some adaptation is required to better address the poverty, exclusion and lack of participation that hinder development in Africa. The book aims to show that a new understanding of human rights from a community understanding could be effectively harnessed to augment or replace traditional human rights-based approaches to development and to bridge the gap between human rights discourse and lived experience.

The originality of Onazi’s approach is his conception of community as the ways and means the poor have become accustomed to surviving. His theory of community is based on locality and human relationships for people excluded from the state and the market – the traditional human rights and development mechanisms advocated by international institutions. Secondly, in choosing access to electricity in Nigeria as his empirical illustration, Onazi highlights the debate surrounding how the poor can gain access to economic and social rights in developing countries. He successfully shows that not only is lack of
access to electricity an important source of poverty and a human development
problem, but also that electricity is instrumental in the provision of economic
and social rights including water and sanitation, healthcare and education.
He argues that a rights-based approach to community can lead to new ways
in which these rights can be achieved. Using a social cooperative model for
Nigeria’s electricity sector, Onazi aims to show that human rights established
from community can make electricity work for the poor. He also claims that his
theory of community addresses ‘the paucity of analysis of the voice of agency
of human rights subjects in current human rights discourse’.

This book is an important contribution to both academic literature and the
debate surrounding international development policies and the fulfilment of
access to economic and social rights. Onazi’s contribution is timely in light of
recent works including William Easterly’s The Tyranny of Experts (Basic Civitas
Books, 2013) and Joseph Stiglitz’s The Price of Inequality (Penguin, 2013) on the
governance problems of existing international institutions – namely that they
are dominated by powerful countries, vulnerable to organised lobbies, and
unable to accommodate different perspectives. Onazi’s critique of good gov-
ernance and market-led development policies sets the context for his theory
of community as ‘a better alternative to traditional human rights approaches
to development, capable of inspiring the poor and the vulnerable to organ-
ise themselves democratically to claim ownership of the processes that deter-
mine their human rights’. At the same time the reader is relieved to find that
while Onazi stands in opposition to the dominant neo-liberal human rights
discourse, the book uses an internal and external critique of human rights to
propose a new theory of community that exploits the ‘opportunities for trans-
formation and collaboration within it’.

The book consists of seven chapters and a short conclusion. Each chapter
has a clear introduction to the subjects that will be discussed and a conclusion
which confirms the key points of Onazi’s argument. This structuring makes it
easy for the reader to refer back to previous points raised and generally nave-
gate the book. The introductory chapter successfully demonstrates that that
the international focus on the justiciability of rights as the most appropriate
means for ensuring that the poor have access to acceptable standards of eco-
monic and social rights does not adequately address the realities of the state
failure, structural crises, neo-liberal economic globalisation and the role of
non-state actors in developing countries, particularly in Africa. It also sets out
the structure of the book, beginning with a critique of the dominant state- and
market-based human rights discourse and introducing Onazi’s theory of com-
unity based human rights as an alternative approach to current development
policies. The issue of access to electricity in Nigeria is used to demonstrate the