Africa 76 (3), 2006

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

LARS ENGBERG-PEDERSEN, *Endangering Development: politics, projects, and environment in Burkina Faso*. Westport, Conn. and London: Praeger (hb US$76.95 – 0275979105). 2003, 184 pp.

Together with a range of other buzzwords, 'participation' has emerged as one of the key terms in the development-aid debate since the early 1990s. What these terms have in common is that their meaning is notoriously vague. This is demonstrated by the fact that they are very difficult, or even impossible, to translate into other languages – something of which English native speakers are probably unaware. Their vagueness appears to be related to the fact that they are actor concepts from the developing world (emic terms in the language of social-anthropological methodology), on the one hand, and are often directly adopted as analytical terms in the social sciences, on the other. Moreover, these terms are now used in a number of scientific disciplines and often with different meanings. The polysemic nature of these terms makes them particularly suitable for use in the development context as it means that different actors can associate entirely different meanings with them. Thus, the concept of 'participation' is now used not only in the political and social sciences, but also in business and management studies where it refers to a particularly effective form of human resources management. Economists can use these terms to describe and analyse organizational processes, while disregarding their political connotations. These fashionable buzzwords depoliticize development cooperation and implicitly convey the idea that policies and economies can be treated like businesses: that is, they can be 'restructured'.

Engberg-Pedersen's book sets itself the task of deconstructing an apolitical understanding of 'participation' on the basis of an empirical study carried out in Burkina Faso. Like many other recent development projects, the *gestion de terroir* project analysed by the author attempted to introduce new decision-making structures, processes and institutions at village level under the heading of 'participation'. A major component of this project was the creation of representative village councils for the management of natural resources. This detailed study shows how these new 'participatory' institutions were appropriated in entirely diverse ways in the context of different local political-economic milieux, in each case adapting to the dominating local political logics. The majority of the members of the village councils were those who had always had something to eat, even in difficult times, and for whom the priority was not, therefore, the implementation of measures to conserve resources, but the improvement of the socio-economic infrastructure of the villages through political lobbying. The adoption of the new village institutions was part of a village strategy of 'window-dressing', through which the village inhabitants primarily hoped to improve their access to project resources. Once established, they provided a stage and artillery for village conflicts which were heightened rather than attenuated by the presence of the external actors. The new village councils were only successfully and permanently embedded in those villages in which they were appropriated by the local elites, thereby strengthening the authority of these elites. The existing form of decision-making processes remained virtually unchanged by the introduction of organizational innovations. Contrary to the hopes of the donors, the marginalized groups who would have profited most from the measures to conserve resources did not assert their rights just because they were now formally entitled to do so, and

democratic processes and practices were not the unavoidable consequence of the introduction of democratic principles and procedures.

Engberg-Pedersen identifies the inadequate theoretical basis of the external intervention as one of the causes of its failure. The new institutional economics attempts to explain the degradation of natural resources using a rational-choice approach: social actors act rationally in the context of existing but inadequate institutions in that they attempt to make the best of a generally unsatisfactory situation. Certainly, this approach represents progress as compared with the – still very widespread – simplistic notion that behaviour harming the natural environment is simply an expression of the short-sightedness of rural dwellers who are incapable of recognizing the alarming situation in which this natural environment finds itself. While the practical conclusion from this latter perspective is that more 'awareness raising' (*sensibilisation*) would be required, the institutional economics approach leads to the demand that institutions be better designed so as to bring individual and collective resource uses into harmony. Engberg-Pedersen's empirical studies show, however, that the reactions of the village populations to the introduction of new decision-making structures have little to do with the rational cost–benefit considerations of individual actors. Far more important is the embedding of these structures in a political, and usually very conflict-ridden, political process and, likewise, the local population's historical experience of previous interventions as well as the frequent contradictions between and within project-financed institutions.

Engberg-Pedersen concludes that development policy should concentrate on the promotion of ongoing change instead of undertaking to design and implement entire institutions that are alien to the local context. Moreover, 'development cooperation' is pulling the wool over its own eyes if it does not admit to its undeniably political nature. As a result, however, it is forced to take political-moral decisions and take sides which cannot be justified using criteria of technical rationality alone. Instead of introducing formal democratic processes and institutions into the project areas, he believes that it would make more sense for donors to support politically marginalized groups. However, this raises the question as to which mandate actually justifies the development institutions in engaging in such political intervention – a question that the author does not address here. Development practice and theory would gain considerably from reflecting on the issues raised by this book.

THOMAS BIERSCHENK
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität
Mainz

THANDIKA MKANDAWIRE (ed.), *African Intellectuals: rethinking politics, language, gender and development*. Dakar: Codesria (pb US$35 – 2 86978 145 8); London: Zed Books (pb £18.95 – 1 84277 621 5). 2005, 248 pp.

This book purports to be an in-depth discussion of African intellectuals and their contribution to the continent, the Diaspora and wider issues pertaining to language, gender and development. It is also an attempt to situate what are deemed 'intellectuals' within their wider social and political context. Problematically, there is no clear definition from the editor of what exactly constitutes an 'intellectual' and judging from the way the book is set up and from the discussions contained within it, the term could be replaced by the less grandiose term of 'academics'. Indeed, there is no exploration of what makes an intellectual different or worthy of study. Only Suttner explores the term in