

neglect to share our reflections with the readers. Here Leopold adds another important account to the growing bulk of ethnographies of war and violence. I have struggled with similar thoughts during my fieldwork engagements in neighbouring Acholiland, also torn by war. So when Leopold at the beginning of his book tells the story of a Canadian researcher 'who had been shot dead in mysterious circumstances two years earlier' (p. 4), I can only add that the same story circulated in Acholi, with the vague indication, as I guess was the case also with Leopold, that I was next. By necessity we have to reflect and deal with these rumours in the field, and it indeed enriches the ethnography when such stories are incorporated to the written account.

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**Undermining Development: the absence of power among local NGOs in Africa** by SARAH MICHAEL

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Writing in 1994, at the peak of the 'NGO decade' in African Development, Eve Sandberg argued that NGOs had become a force, rather than a mere category, in African development politics. Indeed, she was categorical that no understanding of African development politics was possible outside the framework of the newly found power of NGOs *vis-à-vis* African governments. Yet a decade on, and volumes of publications on NGOs in Africa later, there is a lack of understanding of the power of African NGOs, due in part to an NGO research tradition that has neglected relational and power issues.

Sarah Michael's book thus comes at an opportune time, as it provides empirical verification of NGOs and the power they wield in African development. The author does this through a three-tier process of (1) outlining a conceptual framework, based on comparative insights, for understanding how NGO power impacts sustainable development; (2) applying the framework to a study of NGOs in three African countries: Senegal, Zimbabwe and Tanzania; and (3) based on the study and comparative insights, offering a set of guidelines through which African NGOs can be empowered. At all these phases, the book succeeds in making innovative conceptual, empirical and policy contributions.

The book is not without limitations, however, and two of these stand out: first, the location of the book in a fundamentally normative research tradition that has prevented a politically robust understanding of NGOs, civil society and their roles. For instance the author, by definitional fiat, limits civil society to 'extra-state actors involved in creating positive change in their communities' (p. 10), ignoring over a decade of debate that such normative and essentialist definitions limit understanding, as in reality civil society and their roles consist in the civil and uncivil, the positive and the negative. But second, the major limitation of the book for understanding African NGOs relates, paradoxically, to the 'history by analogy', within which the power of African NGOs is assessed in the light of the experience of others: that is, 'powerful' NGOs in South Asia and Latin America. Analytically this is problematic, as questions about African NGO roles and

impact, including issues of their power, cannot be adequately answered until NGOs and civil society have been historicised, contextualised and analysed in the light of African experiences.

This notwithstanding, this is a book that has lots to recommend it, not least the innovative conceptual framework, empirical documentation based on the three African countries, comparative insights derived from a review of NGO experiences in South Asia, Latin America and Africa, and an extensive bibliography for those with an interest in the topic. For the African analyses, however, the book's major contribution is the timely reminder that two decades after they emerged as a force on the continent's development institutional landscape, we are still a long way from a comprehensive understanding of how NGOs have affected African development.

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