

Book Review

Book Author: Wangari Maathai **Book title:** *The Challenge for Africa*
Year of Publication: 2009 **Publisher:** Pantheon Books, New York
Book pages: 336 **Book ISBN:** 978-0-307-37740-1. **Price:** \$25.

Reviewers: Luka Sabas NJAU, Moshi Co-operative University, Tanzania & Sylvester Philip ISUJA, Research Triangle Institute/USAID Tusome Pamoja-Tanzania

The book *The Challenge for Africa* has been written by Wangari Maathai, a winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize and founder of Green Belt Movement, a grassroots movement made of networks of rural women with the focus on civil and environmental campaigns. The book has been written from a worldview largely shaped and informed by author's extensive background on grassroots community work engagement, environmental protection, political leadership and lecturing (Biology) at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. The book tackles a myriad of challenges facing African continent ranging from poor leadership and governance, dependency on foreign aids, the crisis of national identity, environmental degradation and land ownership. It is enriched with numerous examples, analyses and solutions generated from author's rich backgrounds.

The author starts with an overview and highlights on such challenges which are then discussed in detail across the book. Looking at the way Africa is entangled in myriad of challenges with virtually no viable solutions, the author introduces the concept of '*The Wrong Bus Syndrome*' and argues that many people and communities in Africa are heading in wrong direction or travelling on wrong path like travelers who have boarded a wrong bus. They have let others, often their leaders, to lead them away from their desired destination.

The book is written for all concerned with the fate of African continent. It is divided into five sections covering the aforesaid challenges that the continent is facing today. With reference to leadership, the book challenges the top leadership in Africa to embrace a genuine leadership that puts peoples' welfare first, the environment at the center of development and maintains a vision of the future founded on justice and sustainability.

Book Evidence

The author's arguments are highly supported by evidences in notes provided at the book end. The author did broad consultations from books, reviews, articles, journals and reports to enrich discussions and in drawing conclusions. In linking the situations across Africa and in depicting the magnitude of challenges; the author has used data obtained from documents and reports of Multinational Corporations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations (UN) agencies, Networks such as UNEP, GEO, UNICEF, UNFAO, UN Economic Commission for Africa and others. Evidences from mass media are also drawn.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Book

On the whole, the book is very relevant to the targeted audiences namely researchers, development specialists (and novices in development arena), advocates and government officials including head of states and indeed to all the African people. By unearthing of the malpractices of the African leaders, the author has posed a strong challenge to the current development practitioners to reflect and change in the way they engage in developments or completely leave the field for better change by others. For the novices such as students of development studies and those looking forward to engaging in the field in various forms; the challenges discussed are very important as lessons for not falling on the same traps as their predecessors. It is also a call to place oneself and playing an active role in addressing the challenges in their various capacities.

The other strength is in the way the author has analyzed the challenges facing Africa in a holistic and comprehensive approach. The author has tackled almost every part of developmental setbacks in Africa from poor leadership and governance, lack of democracy and environmental degradation to the rampant conflicts that is racking the continent to date. The author managed to analyze the interconnectedness of the developmental challenges through the eight MDGs (now SDGs) thus posing a challenge for thorough reflection in approaching development in a holistic way both at policy and practice levels. The centrality of the environment to all development processes has been well tackled from the author's wide experience as an environmentalist.

Apart from such strengths, the book has some weaknesses; a clear one seen in exaggeration of the positive picture of pre-colonial African societies. The author claims that people of pre-colonial African societies were non-exploitative, lived in love and compassion and that colonialism corrupted this way of life. The fact is some pre-colonial societies e.g. those around Lake Victoria had exploitative social-political set ups with kingdoms charging on farm products, accumulating wealth and some even owning slaves. Likewise, the author's call for promoting 'micro-nations' as a remedy to deculturation of African communities, cannot be taken as a remedy that can cut across Africa. Countries like Rwanda, South Sudan and others that have experienced ethnicity and violence along tribal lines requires a unifying culture than 'micro-nations' that can end up refueling antagonism. Reviewers also differ with the author on the need to incentivize African leaders through initiatives like the Mo Ibrahim prize for achievement in African leadership. To reviewers' opinion, some African leaders are unwilling to leave power because of their worries to face justice for crimes committed while in office and not because of the uncertainties associated with life without access to the perks of office as claimed by Mo Ibrahim initiative. Regarding the prize as assurance of a quality living after retirement, reviewers would still say the quality of life an African ex-president can enjoy in Africa is far above that of ordinary citizens in African standards.

Conclusion

It is worth noting the fact that, though the book was written in 2009; much of the statuses of the challenges discussed are still the same or even worsened. The challenges facing agricultural communities with regards to access to land and markets and poor methods of farming are still common across Africa. Misappropriation and embezzlement of public funds by corrupt regimes has happened and is still happening across the continent. Africa is still witnessing a number of leaders who can be classified as

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‘cheetahs’ or ‘hippos’, getting glued to power and manipulating constitutional amendments to remain in power. There is no shortage of them across the continent. *“The Challenge for Africa”* is thus a powerful critique on Africa by an African.

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