Book Review - Putting People First: African Priorities for the UN Millennium Assembly
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Putting People First: African Priorities for the UN Millennium Assembly
Mathoma, Pandelani, Mills, Greg and Stremlau, John (eds.) 2000
Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, 129 pp.

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Putting People First is a collection of edited papers, which were commissioned and then discussed at a conference held at Johannesburg in November 1999 under the joint auspices of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) and the International Relations Department at the University of the Witwatersrand. The theme of the conference was "Priorities for Africa and the UN Millennium Assembly". Because of the centrality of human security in the conference discussions, the editors of the papers decided to capture this in the title of the book, Putting People First, as the people are central to the whole concept of human security. The main message of the book is that for too long Africa has been seen by the world as a problem to be solved, rather than a voice to be heard. Putting People First is a bold African voice, statement and contribution about the challenges facing Africa, particularly in the area of peace, security and development. It provides a discussion of possible solutions as conceived and articulated by African intellectuals, including the potential role of the United Nations as seen by Africans themselves.

The book is organised around the major themes that were identified by the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, for the UN Millennium Assembly, namely: peace and security, development and poverty eradication, human rights and democracy, and the issue of strengthening the United Nations as a global organisation. A total of eight different authors formulated their themes around the above broad areas and succeeded in adding the missing African voice and African realities.

Sikose Mji and Pandelani T. Mathoma, one of the editors of the book, wrote the preliminaries, contributing a preface and a foreword respectively. Mji invites the world to ponder on the question: "Can there be a 'new millennium' for Africa and the UN Assembly without a paradigm shift from unbridled globalization to one with a people-centred development focus?" (p vii). She identifies certain core principles that form the foundation and integral part of a people-oriented development strategy, namely: ethics (less violation of human rights), inclusion (less marginalisation of people and countries), human security (less instability of societies and less vulnerability of people), and development (less poverty and deprivation). Mathoma, on the other hand, provides a context and background to the eight essays and comments on the thrust of some individual contributions.

Putting People First is organised into eight neat and comprehensive chapters. The first one, by John Stremlau, is captioned "Putting People First: Priorities for Africa and the UN Millennium Assembly", and the title of the book is derived from this contribution. Stremlau boldly pushes the point that the African continent should not only be seen as a problem to be solved but as a voice to be heard. He challenges the international community to listen to African leaders when they articulate their priorities and to help them realise their plans. He proceeds to redefine pan-African relations with a view to

entrench a more people-centred approach to security and development, and emphasises the strategic value of human rights and democratic realism. He presents Africa's challenge to the west, delineates the new priorities for Africa at the UN, and concludes with a discussion of a new North-South co-operation encompassing African priorities in its agenda.

The second chapter is by Greg Mills on "Global Realities and African Priorities: A View from South Africa". He assesses the nature of past international relations and grapples with the challenge of how the present African communities can equip themselves for the future global problems and realities. Like Stremlau, he is concerned about the African position in the international system. He observes that "we are facing a world which is both fragmenting and integrating" (p 33). He emphasises the role of information technology in speeding up the entry of the poor and isolated into the global economy as well as the promotion of human rights and democracy. He discusses the humanitarian crisis situation, drug abuse and trafficking, the spread of HIV/AIDS, poverty and gender inequality, the combating of terrorism, and the safeguarding of the environment   all of which have to be factored into the new global diplomatic calculation and matrix.

Ogaba Oche's "Human Security in Africa: An Agenda for the Next Millennium" constitutes chapter three of the book, and is concerned with three major issues, namely: definition of conflict, the emergence of the concept of human security and the strategies and tactics of conflict resolution. He concludes: "As Africa enters the 21st Century there is very little doubt that the enhancement of human security should constitute a focal point of its development agenda" (p 50). In chapter four, Abdoul Aziz M'Baye deals with the controversial issue of "Nations, States or Nation-states" in the context of human rights and democratisation in Africa. His focus is on the evolution of African structures and institutions and how they generate, or are prone to, conflict. He concludes with a challenge for embracing the notion of an African renaissance, which he hopes   if well marketed and given practical expression   "is to bring about a real renewal of the African structures, their nations and ultimately the modernization of their states" (p 68).

Shadrack B.O. Gutto's contribution, entitled "The African State, Human Rights and Refugees", provides a radical critique of the concept and the process of globalisation, the concept of the state and government, the phenomenon of arbitrary colonial boundaries, and the problem of refugees in Africa. With regard to refugees, he discusses the role of the UN and civil society in combating the refugee problem, and also examines the crucial issue of the conditions and circumstances that produce refugees in Africa. He concludes with a call for the reform of the African state as well as the rethinking of the "New World Order" so as to open vistas of humane treatment of citizens and refugees.

In chapter six Shyley Kondowe grapples with the pertinent issues of sovereignty, intervention and democratisation in what she regards as "small Africa states". Kondowe comes up with illuminating observations: that "many of the African leaders and governments have used 'state sovereignty' as a tool to sustain the oppression of their citizens"; and that the western powers, on the other hand, have "used 'intervention' as a tool for marginalizing those segments of society that they do not want because of racial, religious or ethnic differences" (p 85). Kondowe argues that democratisation has created a competition among western ideologies and systems, and patronage of the poor by the rich. In short, Kondowe's contribution is a radical critique of the triple concepts of sovereignty, intervention and democratisation in Africa.

Paul Omach, in chapter seven, discusses the dynamics of domestic factionalism and the internationalisation of conflict in East and Central Africa. He views East and Central Africa as a "security complex", that is, countries with interlinked security concerns wherein internal conflicts easily spill over to neighbouring states, leading to intervention and counter-intervention in the domestic political upheavals and subsequently resulting in interstate wars. He calls for an examination of the interface between domestic factionalism and international politics. Indeed, East and Central Africa is experiencing a "security complex" arising from the DRC conflict, vindicating Omach's hypothesis. The final contribution is by Bassey E. Ate, on the enhancement of regional capacity for conflict and security management in the 21st century. It is a study of the so-called "Ecomog Concept" as ideal for grappling with conflict in Africa rather than looking for the outside world to take the burden of protecting African people from atrocities committed by Africa.

Thus, in terms of content, the book is very rich and informative on aspects of human rights and democracy, general problems affecting Africa, identification of African priorities for the 21st Century, the nature of African conflict, critique of strategies and tactics of conflict resolution and suggestions for the way forward.

The strength of the book lies in its approach which runs through all eight chapters, that of "putting people first". This approach is an excellent innovation drawn from critical peace and security studies literature. It stands out as an alternative way of seeing the world   taking the people as the major point of reference and moving away from the traditional, narrow, selfish and exclusively state-centric paradigm which emphasises security of regime, territory and government. In this way the book reveals crucial details on the formidable threats to human security such as poverty, disease, vagaries of environment, exploitation, hunger, oppression and injustice. The book also stands poignantly as a critique of the unequal and exploitative relations between the North and the South and exposes the unfair conditions under which the African continent was integrated into the nexus of the evolving world capitalist system. It also stands as a clarion and articulate call for the democratisation, not only of the governments of Africa but also of the New World Economic Order, to be spearheaded by the UN.

However, there is one major weakness of the book as a whole, that is, the absence of any discussion on HIV/AIDS as one of the major threats to human security. The reality is that, never before, not even when the bubonic plague ravaged Europe in the Middle Ages, has there been a disease as devastating to mankind as the current HIV/AIDS pandemic. The book glosses over this crucial threat to mankind. There are other weaknesses such as the lack of an index and a selected bibliography at the end.

Nevertheless, the book remains a monumental contribution to the fields of history, peace and security, international affairs, politics and development studies.

Notes

References