

**Garth Myers.** 2016: *Urban environments in Africa - A critical analysis of environmental politics*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press. xiv + 214 pp. £ 19.99 (hardback). ISBN: 9781447322917

By 2030, the fastest rates of population growth and urbanisation will be witnessed in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by India and parts of Southeast Asia (Nagendra et al., 2018). Academic literature (Shoffner et al., 2018) as well as policy documents (UNDP, 2018) have been acknowledging that urbanisation is a global phenomenon with strong environmental sustainability implications and cities have become central to ensuring a sustainable future (Acuto et al., 2018). In 'Urban Environments in Africa', Garth Myers deconstructs the criticisms of urban political ecology (UPE) and investigates African environmentalism from different ontological and epistemological points of view.

The book's arguments enables urban political ecologists to problematize and question the binaries between, for example urban and rural or society and nature, that have continually challenged urban studies and urban-policy making. Drawing on fieldwork data as well as on multidisciplinary studies on urban environmental history, urban spirituality, biogeography and environmental politics, Myers argues that most of current urban knowledge as well as urban policies in the Global South are predominantly shaped by research on and from the North. However, the author underlines that urban environments in the Global South such as those taken as case studies in the book – Nairobi, Kenya; Lusaka, Zambia; Cape Town, South Africa; Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and Dakar, Senegal, have strong imperatives, and unique but often overlooked capacity to innovate and experiment for sustainability. The author calls, therefore, for a renewed research focus on urbanization in Africa, and suggests targeted efforts to correct structural biases in the knowledge production system drawing obvious connections to the trials of today, with the colonialist past and generally corrupt present.

The book is organized in five chapters. Each chapter reflects the author's perspective on how to read and interpret urban environments in Africa and the interplay with ecology and politics. Chapter 2, for instance, reflects on historical-geographical research that has documented various connections between colonialism and environmental narratives. Chapter 3 is a reading from the cityscape lens where African's urban areas are seen as physical environments as well as socially, culturally and spiritually constructed spaces. The author reflects in several spiritual and symbolic construction of urban environments. For example, he highlights the 'tree worship' in Zanzibar where nearly 25% of all neighbourhoods of this Tanzania cityscape have a tree in the name, a phenomena which reflects togetherness among personal beliefs, nature and the urban space.

Chapters 4 and 5 are particular relevant for a readership beyond urban political ecologists. These two chapters provide empirical evidence of novel participatory approaches that are seldom represented in UPE literature. In Chapter 4, Myers reflects urban environments, and the political struggles within, through the lenses of artists who have been reflecting on Africa geography and ethnography. I applaud the author's decision to include artists' views in his assessment. Artists are often neglected in participatory urban studies and their voices often forgotten in environmental governance arrangements, yet they are volunteer-powered to contribute to change. The author's opinion is that artists offer a diverse range of historical and contemporary cultural perspectives and artistic expressions of urban environments. For example, hip-hop artists as well as sculptors, photographers and playwrights have, through various artistic representations (e.g. graffiti), been claiming better urban environmental services, for water, sanitation and solid waste in Pikine, a city in Dakar.

In Chapter 5, the author's key argument is that local experts from informal settlements and communities are crucial informants and data holders of understanding urban environments and even

shape political regimes, from authoritarian, to more democratic forms of governance. In this respect the example of Tunisia is given. Among several other cases, Myers argues that grassroots have been a hallmark in Cape Town's environmental activism. Formal and informal community-based organizations have been demanding for housing, land, water, better public services and more effective landscape conservation policies. Other examples on the nexus grassroots and the politics of Africa's urban environments presented in the book are the Dar es Salaam's grassroots eco-conscious movement for bicyclists' rights; or the extraordinary role of grassroots activists' in seeking for electoral transparency in Nairobi, through the open-access digital mapping of Kibera, a small Nairobi community.

The inclusion of the views of artists and the grassroots in discussing the politics of urban environmental is a strength of the book and add value to the toolbox of urban political ecologists. The author, however, misses the opportunity to draw on these views and provide policy recommendations over urban-based issues such as waste management, urban expansion onto nearby fertile agricultural land and consequent land degradation. I concur, however, with the author's central argument, articulated through the five chapters and case studies, that both science and politics must promote inclusive approaches to environmental governance in general and urban environmental management in particular by bringing together alternative viewpoints such as those produced by artists, activists and local communities. A common line of reasoning across the chapters is that each different group of actors values the natural environment based on their social and cultural background and spiritual beliefs. An additional strength of the book is the extensive literature review, which illuminates intersections between socio-political histories and environmental injustices African cities are facing.

The book is a useful reading for those involved in addressing environmental issues and implementing urban policies aimed at securing a more ecologically balanced and sustainable future across Africa and beyond. I missed, however, a section on directions for future research, which could have touched upon new partnerships between governments, the private sector, and environmental organizations. This, nevertheless, do not hamper the book's utility for public sector leaders, spatial planners or policy-makers, as well as for researchers, as it provides a theoretically sound and empirically based set of ways of reading and understanding urban environments in Africa.

## Reference

- Acuto, M., Parnell, S., & Seto, K. C. (2018). Building a global urban science. *Nature Sustainability*, 1(1), 2–4. doi:10.1038/s41893-017-0013-9
- Nagendra, H., Bai, X., Brondizio, E. S., & Lwasa, S. (2018). The urban south and the predicament of global sustainability. *Nature Sustainability*, 1(7), 341–349. doi:10.1038/s41893-018-0101-5
- Shoffner, A., Wilson, A. M., Tang, W., & Gagné, S. A. (2018). The relative effects of forest amount, forest configuration, and urban matrix quality on forest breeding birds. *Scientific Reports*, 8(1). doi:10.1038/s41598-018-35276-9
- UNPD=United Nations Development Programme (2018). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision. United Nations Population Division, New York. Available at <https://population.un.org/wup/>

**Eduardo Oliveira**

Postdoc researcher at the Earth and Life Institute of the  
Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium  
email: [eduardo.dasilva@uclouvain.be](mailto:eduardo.dasilva@uclouvain.be)  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8838-2493>