

Book Reviews

State of the Environment in Southern Africa, a Report by the Southern African Research and Documentation Centre in collaboration with the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and SADC, Andrea Booth, John McCullum, James Mpinga & Mutizwa Mukute, edited by Munyaradzi Chenje and Phyllis Johnson. Harare, SARDC, 1994, ISBN 0-7974-1374-X, 332p.

Why is it that books on the environment tend to be so much better presented than books on, say, politics, gender, or other social issues? This, the first offering of SARDC's environment resource centre, is no exception. It represents a major departure from SARDC's previous publications, and it also gives the institution as a whole a more concrete image and direction.

The book is presented in three parts. Part One sets out background information on Southern Africa, its physical environment and the way it has been managed throughout history to the present. The first chapter in this section gives a regional overview in the context of related socioeconomic issues, such as population growth and economic development, which affect people's interaction with the environment. The chapters on history and policy deal respectively with traditional environmental management techniques and the laws, policies and institutions that regulate the Southern African environment today. The next chapter describes the different ecozones in the region – large natural units which are controlled by a set of common processes, mostly climatic, and dominated by life-forms with similar physical adaptations to those processes. The chapter on climate reviews the role of weather patterns, particularly drought, as an important context for understanding environmental issues.

Part Two sets out a series of environmental issues of interest to Southern Africa. The issues covered here are the most topical, selected (as the introduction states) after discussions with:

"...literally hundreds of people in the environmental field throughout southern Africa...mentioned as foremost during visits to all 11 countries, and further highlighted at a conference of environmental personnel from all countries in the region..."

The issues discussed range from soils and land use, woodlands and forests, and wildlife and protected areas, to freshwater and marine resources, pollution and armed conflict.

The last section of the book, Part Three, looks toward the future. The chapter on global atmospheric changes considers the possible impact on the region of global warming and depletion of the ozone layer, and reviews the actions being taken, regionally and internationally, to contain this. The final chapter on regional trends and scenarios takes the major trends identified in the overview and projects them into the future. These scenarios were developed at a workshop which considered the region's environmental strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and problems.

As a librarian, I was interested in the book as a process, emanating from the SARDC environment resource centre and its databases. This process offers endless possibilities to other documentation centres, as to how the invaluable information they contain can be made available to people in an easily-consumable format. This work goes a long way to solving the librarian/documentalist's problem of how to make people use the information they store.

As mentioned before, the presentation of this book is excellent – dare I say perfect? It uses illustrations, maps, and above all, boxes, somewhat like the UNDP and World Bank reports, to great effect, all forming a highly readable and interesting product. The linkages between chapters is a most useful innovation, arising no doubt from the book's inception in a database.

It also does great service by starting with a clear definition of what, exactly, sustainable development actually is.

The purpose of the book is stated to be “...a tool for decision-makers to use in developing appropriate agendas for action. . .”, but “...not a policy study”. The level of the language in which it is written would be highly appropriate for a school textbook, and I for one would recommend that it be adopted in the secondary school syllabus. But the level and depth of discussion might be a little too simplistic for the decision- or policy-maker.

It would have been nice to see the issue of gender and the environment awarded a chapter in the book rather than the occasional box. In Southern Africa women are the principal users of and dependers on natural resources in their daily lives: they are the farmers, the drawers of water and collectors of firewood, and also the main victims of pollution, drought and deforestation.

In its final chapter, the book does address some policy issues and future scenarios, and in earlier chapters advocates the use of indigenous/traditional solutions to environmental problems, but it offers no radical new solutions. As Prof Mugadza recently stated, we may need to change our entire economic base in the region in order to confront the problems of drought and depletion of natural resources. Perhaps we should be looking at developing new industries as an alternative to agriculture so that we can import food that we can no longer grow ourselves.

Following this valuable overview of the environment in Southern Africa, we look forward to other products from SARDC's resource centre and congratulate them on this one.

Reviewed by Anne Derges, Librarian, School of Social Work.

Social Policy and Administration in Zimbabwe, School of Social Work, Harare, Zimbabwe, Journal of Social Development in Africa, ISBN: 0-7974-1468-1 (1995), 212pp, Price: Z\$60, US\$25 (p/b).

The book discusses the history of social policy in Zimbabwe from the pre-Independence period up to the present time. The book looks at major factors – ideological, cultural, political, availability of resources and regional and international organisations which determine the direction of social policy. The book also considers poverty and inequality in developing countries with particular emphasis on Zimbabwe. One result of poverty has been that “...increasingly great numbers of peasants annually drift into urban squatter compounds and swelling the ranks of the unemployed” (p 40). This trend does not apply to Zimbabwe alone, but other African countries are also going through. Different aspects of social policy and administration in Zimbabwe are also discussed. These are rural development, social welfare, social security, health, housing and education. The last chapter is an overview of the above topics.

During the pre-Independence period, social policies regarding the above aspects were discriminatory to blacks. Not only were the social policies discriminatory, they also forced blacks to lose some of their traditional practices. For example, health policies discouraged the indigenous people from using traditional healers. The policies transformed formerly self-sufficient medical practices and made them dependent on foreign medical practices which the people scarcely understood and which were, in any case, largely inaccessible (especially to those who lived in rural areas). All other aspects of life were similarly affected. It was sadly noted that during the pre-Independence period, when the country had more resources, the quality of life for whites was much better than that for blacks, and it was only after Independence that the quality of life for blacks began to improve. Unfortunately the economy then started to go down, hence the introduction of the structural adjustment programme. The programme has resulted in a low quality of life again for black people, and up to now, Zimbabwe is still going through this, with its negative consequences for the majority.

The authors did well by starting with the definition and analysis of social policy. This is vital because definitions of concepts vary from one scholar to another. It discusses factors which shaped the development of social policy in Zimbabwe