

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Earth System Governance

journal homepage: www.sciencedirect.com/journal/earth-system-governance

Book review

Africa's Right to Development in a Climate-Constrained World, Kennedy Mbeva, Reuben Makomere, Joanes Atela, Victoria Chengo, Charles Tonui. Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland (2023). 307 p., CHF 153.50 hardcover

The most remarkable thing that Kennedy Mbeva, Reuben Makomere, Joanes Atela, Victoria Chengo, and Charles Tonui have achieved is the need to tell *the Africa story*. Their recent jointly co-authored book *Africa's Right to Development in a Climate-Constrained World* is a comprehensive rendition of Africa's sustainable development journey in the face of the continent's economic consolidation and the shifting international climate regime and in the context of the changing international power structure, which they characterize as an 'onset of multipolarity' (Mbeva et al., 2023: 21–23).

The book consists of six chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. The book begins with a discussion of recent transformative initiatives in Africa—the adoption of the African Union Agenda of 2013, the ratification of the Paris Agreement of 2015, and the signing of the African Free Trade Agreement of 2018. These are representative of the two herculean tasks Africa undertakes simultaneously—its socio-economic development and industrialization which is a carbon-intensive endeavour, and climate action through National Adaptation Plans (NAP) which entails progressive reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. These two tasks seem to contradict each other. However, sustainability and development were reconciled, albeit discursively, within the framework of *sustainable development* in the Brundtland Convention of 1978. The book is interested in unpacking the implementation of sustainable development and the practical unfolding of this term in the African context.

Sustainable development is further contextualized in the changing nature of the international climate regime. This regime was initially formed on the principles of bifurcation of countries into two groups based on historical emissions, technology, capability, and finance transfer, and a static equilibrium. In this regime, African countries were included in the non-Annex list which meant that the industrialized countries (from Annex I) were obligated to provide the African countries with various kinds of support. However, this regime became untenable because of, as the authors argue, a shift in the international power structure from a unipolar to a multipolar order and led to a new international climate regime. This new international regime, touted as post-Kyoto, was strengthened in the subsequent Conference of Parties (COP) at Copenhagen (in 2009) and Paris (in 2015), and characterized as a shift from bifurcated to universal participation, from technology transfer to technology absorption and building endogenous capacities, and from a static equilibrium to a dynamic pledge-review-ratchet mechanism where countries make progressive emission reduction commitments plans, and implement them. The narrative of historically calculated emissions was replaced with current emissions to accommodate the

increasing emissions from emerging economies such as India, China, and Brazil. This new regime has brought several implications for Africa such as less dependence on the United States' neoliberal order and foreign finance, technology transfer, and adoption of greater obligations towards climate action. It has led African countries to develop endogenous modes of industrialization in addition to increasingly turning to alternative regimes discussed ahead.

The regional integration of Africa has been accompanied by a distancing from ex-colonial powers. There has been a dramatic rise in Chinese and Indian investments in Africa through ambitious developmental diplomacy. These projects have been keen on integrating sustainability transitions in their development models. The book discusses crucial policy areas, such as renewable energy, water security, energy supply chains, and anti-fossil fuel norms that are gaining prominence in African political discourses making climate action more multi-sectoral, and thus complex. The complexity of the international climate regime has further increased with the rise of non-state actors at the supra as well as subnational levels in Africa. To this end, the authors argue that governing complexity is the most desirable approach for African countries. This cognitive policy approach is alert and dynamic, and responds to change quickly, with a balanced and adaptive structure, and policy-makers assuming the role of complex designers to engage effectively.

The book encourages African countries to instrumentalize their agency. For instance, in the UN Global Compact negotiations, African countries were at the forefront of opposing the industrialized countries' lack of interest in providing implementation support. This led to the collapse of the negotiations because of the lack of agreement between the industrialized and developing countries. This incident illustrates the power of agency. Africa's agency is also evident in its moving away from excessive dependence on ex-colonial countries to forging more equitable alliances with the Global South.

The book makes several positive contributions that are worth mentioning here. The theoretical scaffolding provided by the authors to substantiate their arguments is rich and inter-disciplinary. These include complexity theory, public goods theory, theories of international relations, and Olson's cooperation theory, among others. The book covers a vast stretch of information, what the authors describe as the 'big picture' (Mbeva et al., 2023: vii). Although the flipside of the big picture approach is that a closer and more detailed look into the individual aspects of Africa's climate policy landscape is missed, the book opens the floodgates to a lot of potential research ideas such as climate politics at sub-regional, national, and sectoral levels in Africa, and the role of non-state actors, private corporations, and transnational networks in climate action.

Some aspects of the book deserve a critical rethinking. Firstly, the book is built on John Mearsheimer's (2019) thesis that the current international power system is multipolar. However, multipolar world orders, in the longue durée of world history, have been unstable systems, replete with wars, and have generally defied collective action. A

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2024.100213>

Available online 4 June 2024

2589-8116/© 2024 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved, including those for text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.

question that emerges here is how would the analysis in the book change if the structural assumptions were built on Wohlforth and Brook's (2016: 7) thesis: '1 + 1 + X' or simply a bipolar one? A bipolar world, where the United States and China constitute the two poles and pursue geopolitical games over the African continent, possibly offers geostrategic opportunities and economic choices to the African countries but at the same time challenges Africa's resolve to economic consolidation, self-reliant development model, and climate action goals.

Secondly, the theoretical framework of the book defines global climate change as a problem of collective action. However, scholars like Matthew Peterson (1996) have argued that such a characterization is simplistic and reduces the climate issue to one that can be solved with negotiations. Instead, they advocate a political economy approach to understand international climate politics rather than a regime approach. A political economy approach would be much more vigilant to the state's role in capital allocation in the global structures of capitalism, and thereby would allow scholars to critically engage with the structural drivers of climate change in Africa.

The book is a clarion call to African scholarship to develop these inquiries further and add to the scholarship on global climate politics. Their attempt to fill an important gap by providing an insider's viewpoint of Africa's big picture resonates well with the burgeoning scholarship from other parts of the Global South that have represented the larger sentiments of the developing world. The book will be instructive to policymakers as it offers insights into the policy approaches that the

authors have conceptualized as governing complexity. The book will also fascinate academics across social sciences and students, especially scholars of International Relations (IR), interested in global climate change, sustainability, African studies, and international politics.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References

- Brooks, S.G., Wohlforth, W.C., 2016. The rise and fall of the great powers in the twenty-first century: China's rise and the fate of America's global position. *Int. Secur.* 40 (3), 7–53. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00225.
- Mbeva, K., Makomere, R., Atela, J., Chengo, V., Tonui, C., 2023. *Africa's Right to Development in a Climate-Constrained World*. Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland.
- Mearsheimer, J., 2019. Bound to fail: the rise and fall of liberal international order. *Int. Secur.* 43 (4), 7–50. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342.
- Patterson, M., 1996. *Global Warming and Global Politics*. Routledge, London, ISBN9780415138710.

Aishwarya Sanas
 Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, India
 E-mail address: as167@snu.edu.in.