
AFRICAN HUMAN RIGHTS LAW JOURNAL

To cite: G Mathiba 'Book review: E Durojaye & G Mirugi-Mukundi (eds) *Exploring the link between poverty and human rights in Africa*'
(2020) 20 *African Human Rights Law Journal* 346-353
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/1996-2096/2020/v20n1a13>

Book review

E Durojaye & G Mirugi-Mukundi (eds) *Exploring the link between poverty and human rights in Africa*

Pretoria University Law Press (2020) 277 pages

Gaopalelwe Mathiba

PhD Candidate and Researcher, University of Cape Town, South Africa

From a multidisciplinary perspective, *Exploring the link between poverty and human rights in Africa* assembles an impressive group of leading scholars, in their own right, on human rights, sociology and development studies. At the core of this edited volume is the probe into how the African continent has fared in navigating a complex interface between poverty alleviation, on one side of the spectrum and the advancement of human rights, on the other. The volume appreciates the intersectionality of its *raison d'être*, namely, poverty, an albatross to many Africans, with many dimensions and causes. The obvious good about this appreciation is that it harnesses the objectivity and realism of the conclusions and solutions presented in this collection.

A common characteristic of many edited volumes is the lack of a coherent thesis or framework that binds all the disparate chapters together into one integrated whole. This, however, is not the case with *Exploring the link between poverty and human rights in Africa*. A visible strength of this volume is that it has been presented along

thematic lines. It captures various interrelated aspects that go hand in hand with poverty. These include (in)equality; food (in)security; the inclusivity of vulnerable groups (disabled persons and women); access to justice; state accountability; structural inefficiencies; power dynamics; governments' interventions or lack thereof; and environmental considerations. Throughout these themes, the volume uncovers the truths and speaks to the prevailing realities, opportunities, challenges and even threats to a shared dream of a more equitable society that is free from poverty.

The volume is edited by two prominent scholars, Ebenezer Durojaye and Gladys Mirugi-Mukundi, both of whom have written widely on seminal issues around human rights, socio-economic rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender and constitutionalism, social justice and inclusive societies, the rule of law and corruption. The exceptional novelty demonstrated in this collection evidences their careful and competent editorship, for which they ought to be commended. I congratulate them for curating this comprehensive blueprint of scholarship to serve as a launch pad for future studies on the question of human rights and poverty.

Structurally, the book features 12 chapters, each comprising approximately 15 to 30 pages. The editors of the collection begin with the framing chapter, titled 'General introduction to poverty and human rights in Africa'. They start by giving a broader understanding of the nature of poverty, what causes it and the various forms through which it manifests itself. They then proceed to conceptualise poverty as a human right concern and establish the link between the two in this regard. One also learns about the significance of this volume in the framing chapter. The editors succinctly explain the contemporary relevance of the book and its positioning in relation to other closely-related scholarly works.¹ It ends by outlining various sections and chapters of the book.

In chapter 2, 'Integrating a human rights approach to food security in national plans and budgets: The South African National Development Plan', May takes us through the link between the national development plans, budgetary patterns and poverty reduction in South Africa. He argues that proper planning through policy formulation and research capacity are critical to the realisation of access to food. Using the South African experience, May points

¹ Such as A Focu, G Mwabu & E Thorbecke *Poverty in Africa: Analytical and policy perspective* (2009); S Jones & N Nelson *Urban poverty in Africa: From understanding to alleviation* (1999) and S Liebenberg & G Quinot *Law and poverty perspectives from South Africa and beyond* (2011).

out that the national development plan has urged improvements in household food and nutrition. Even so, however, he is of the view that for such a plan to succeed, it requires more specific detail and must be grounded in human rights norms. May's main argument appears to be that human rights principles should be incorporated into the budgetary and planning programmes in South Africa in order to realise food security. In trying to guide as to how exactly this is to be achieved, he identifies some rights-based approaches to planning for food security to include food security diagnostics, macro- and micro-economic policies, the appropriate sequencing of policy and multi-year budgeting strategies.

In chapter 3, 'Is South Africa winning the war on poverty and inequality? What do the available statistics tell us?' by Sekyere, Gordon, Pienaar and Bohler-Muller, we learn more about three primary dimensions of social inequality in South Africa. These are income inequality; poverty and human development; and access to services. The authors ascertain whether or not the implementation of a diverse set of policy initiatives since the demise of apartheid in 1994 actually has reduced social inequality. They find that the inequality gaps have widened and remain a threat to social and economic development in South Africa. They proceed to identify the main drivers of income inequality in the country as including race, gender and geographical location. In trying to meet the aspirations of this edited volume, the authors then examine the link between human development and poverty in the country. They observe that there has been mixed progress with regard to indicators on human development in the country and argue that 'as poverty is a reflection of multiple forms of deprivation in an individual's life, it is important to explore multidimensional subjective poverty measures'.² In conclusion the authors recommend that a holistic approach to measuring inequality with a stronger focus on subjective multi-dimensional indicators might be the way forward towards addressing inequality gaps in South Africa.

In the most interesting chapter 4, 'Who really "state-captured" South Africa? Revealing silences in poverty, inequality and structurally-corrupt capitalism', Bond helps us to understand what in recent times has been a buzzword in South Africa, namely, 'state capture'. The author gives thoughtful insights on the impact of 'state capture' on poverty. He explore the debates around poverty and inequality, on the one hand, and rife economic corruption, on the other. In a

2 E Sekyere et al 'Is South Africa winning the war on poverty and inequality? What do the available statistics tell us?' in E Durojaye & G Mirugi-Mukundi (eds) *Exploring the link between poverty and human rights in Africa* (2020) 43.

very interesting analysis, he examines how neo-liberal policies have contributed, in one way or another, to the poverty trajectory in South Africa. With much emphasis, Bond offers a cautionary perspective that unless the root causes of these miseries and their interlinkages are adequately addressed, the simple narratives such as that

[a]partheid was a tragedy the legacy of which can be addressed by deracialising capitalism; inequality must be addressed through a more sensible economic policy, a generous social policy and a growing middle class to ensure stability; the way forward is to restore macro-economic discipline, maintain conservative fiscal policy, tackle state and especially parastatal corruption, and rebuild the credit ratings agencies³

will merely remain narratives. At one point the author unpacks in more detail what he calls 'the fight between hostile brothers',⁴ namely, the 'Zuptas' and 'white monopoly capital'. He concludes by offering a very different interpretation of the above 'simple narratives'.

In chapter 5, 'Poverty, women and the human right to water for growing food', Mbanjo-Mweso grapples with the question of whether the human right to water for growing food can be included in the normative content of the human right to water. She examines the relevance of the right to water for poverty reduction, with a particular focus on women. Her main argument is that a lack of access to water undermines not only productivity, but also economic growth, thereby deepening and perpetuating the inequalities featuring in the current patterns of globalisation that side-line and trap vulnerable households below the poverty line. She points out that access to water for production could be a solution to addressing poverty among women and other vulnerable groups. In consolidating her argument and bringing it home, she contends that states should take more drastic measures to ensure that women have access to water for food production and other usages.

Oluduro explores 'The link between environmental pollution and poverty in Africa' in chapter 6. He examines the meaning of environmental pollution and the causal relationship between poverty and environmental degradation, and traverses several ways in which environmental pollution exacerbates poverty. He proceeds to examine the legal framework aimed at addressing environmental pollution and how this may be of assistance in poverty reduction in

3 P Bond 'Who really "state-captured" South Africa? Revealing silences in poverty, inequality and structurally-corrupt capitalism' in Durojaye & Mirugi-Mukundi (n 2) 62.

4 Bond (n 3) 76.

the region. The author concludes by urging African governments to take collective action to protect the environment in order to reduce poverty, which continues to damage the environment and puts the people at risk.

In chapter 7, 'Alleviating poverty through retirement reforms', Malherbe is very succinct and goes straight to the point in making a strong case for reform in pension laws. She demonstrates how retirement reforms may be utilised as a mechanism to address poverty of not only elderly persons, but also of other members of their households. In so doing, she identifies the current shortfalls in the provision of social security to older persons. She goes on to argue that this potential poverty reduction mechanism can only succeed if retirement reforms are placed at the top of the list for social security reforms that are based on the realisation of the right to social security. In conclusion, she notes that attempts at retirement reforms must place the emphasis on principles of human rights and must strive towards universal access to social security.

In chapter 8, 'Disability, poverty and human rights in Africa: Opportunities for poverty reduction from the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', Chilemba establishes the nexus between disability and poverty. He observes that in many societies, including those in Africa, the poverty rates among persons with disabilities are strongly felt compared to the rates among other members of the constituency. He further notes that persons with disabilities face several discriminatory practices in society, which result in a lack of access to social services and thus perpetuate poverty. The author then considers how the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities may be utilised as a useful tool for addressing poverty among persons with disabilities in Africa. He analyses disability-related legal frameworks for realising the rights to equality, employment, education and social security in some African countries. He concludes by identifying weaknesses in some of the examined pieces of legislation meant to address poverty among persons with disabilities and provides some suggestions for the way forward.

At the centre of Ntlama's chapter 9, 'The co-existence of gender inequality and poverty in Southern Africa' is the feminisation of poverty in Southern Africa. The author provides an overview of the efforts undertaken by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) governments through the adoption of the Protocol on Gender and Development to address the link between gender inequality and poverty across the sub-region. She pushes an agenda for the adoption of a human rights-oriented approach in the pursuit of large-scale

legal reforms, and argues that such is a necessary foundation for the advancement of gender equality and the elimination of poverty as envisaged in the Protocol. The author lays bare the factors that hinder the achievement of equality and also attempts to define the concept of gender equality and how it interfaces with poverty. She proceeds with a discussion on the importance of this Protocol. She concludes by observing that although legal reforms are important, they can only be effective if combined with other measures and strategies to address gender inequality in society.

In chapter 10, 'The potential of the African human rights system in addressing poverty', Nkrumah examines the potential of the African human rights system in realising access to justice for disadvantaged groups and how this potentially can reduce poverty in the region. He argues that the inclusion of socio-economic rights and the recent Declaration on Employment and Poverty Alleviation in Africa provide the impetus to addressing poverty in the region. The author particularly singles out the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter) as one of the celebrated regional human rights instruments that guarantees both civil and political rights, as well as socio-economic rights, as enforceable rights. According to Nkrumah, this ensures that the 'substantive norms provide formal avenues for the quasi-judicial and judicial ambits of the regional human rights architecture to adjudicate on, and enforce socio-economic rights and freedom from poverty'.⁵ He concludes by noting that through collaboration and harmonisation of the mandates of the monitoring bodies, the African Union human rights system provides the strongest framework for addressing poverty.

In chapter 11, 'Realising access to justice for the poor: Lessons from working with rural communities', Balogun problematises the lack of access to justice for impoverished and marginalised communities. She makes known the key factors that present hurdles to access to justice for disadvantaged groups and how this exacerbates poverty. She further notes that in any society access to justice and resources is an essential element in addressing inequality and poverty. Balogun proceeds by offering an instructive perspective that African governments should embark on reforms that will ensure access to justice for vulnerable and marginalised groups in rural communities, with a view to addressing poverty. She uses the example of a non-governmental organisation by the name of Centre for Community Justice and Development as a case to illustrate the importance of

5 B Nkrumah 'The potential of the African human rights system in addressing poverty' in Durojaye & Mirugi-Mukundi (n 2) 217.

addressing poverty through the realisation of access to justice for people in rural communities.

Adams's chapter 12, 'The role of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) in ensuring state accountability to address poverty' concludes the volume. The author discusses the role of national human rights institutions in facilitating access to justice for disadvantaged groups in society. Using the SAHRC as a case study, she argues that the SAHRC has played an important role in ensuring that the government adheres to its constitutional obligations to protect and promote the rights of disadvantaged members of society in South Africa. She further explores the link between poverty and human rights and what it means in the South African context. She advances from there by highlighting the role of the SAHRC in addressing poverty and ensuring accountability on the part of the government to protect marginalised and vulnerable groups against it. She concludes by noting that despite the promising role of the SAHRC in addressing poverty in the country, the Commission is confronted by several operational and structural challenges that have hampered its effectiveness in this regard.

To this end, my overall impression of the book is that it is rich in content, inspiring in vision and empowering of the targeted readership. It clarifies comprehensively a conceptual gap in the notion of poverty as a human right violation. It also presents a detailed summary of the most notable attempts and efforts levelled at poverty alleviation from an international, regional and national perspective. However, an interesting discussion one seems to have missed in this volume surrounds the validity and utility of the distinction between 'poverty' and 'extreme poverty' as an emerging conceptual dichotomy. Such distinction, in my view, is largely arbitrary and does not solve the problem but exacerbates it. I am diametrically opposed to this reductionist approach of conceptualising poverty. Poverty should be poverty. It is against the basic formulations of the universally-accepted human rights norms and standards to attempt to classify impoverishment into certain degrees with the aim of forging an excuse by governments to escape their constitutional obligations of protecting the poor and vulnerable against the wrath of poverty.

The book also lacks the general conclusion chapter that offers a critical synthesis of key observations and major 'take-aways' from individual chapters. One purpose this concluding chapter would have served is to bring into one accent the strides of new knowledge each chapter contributes to the central topic. That the African region continues with a struggle for poverty alleviation is made clear in

the volume. That those mostly affected in this regard are poor and marginalised groups is also evident. However, whether there is the moral clarity and political will to act on the knowledge available to reduce poverty and inequalities across African societies remains to be seen.

Be that as it may, besides the highlighted shortfalls, the book and its content remain of top-notch quality. It best marks a deep appreciation of inequalities and poverty as experienced in Africa more than any other previous work. It challenges the reader to reflect on and think more broadly about the current general status of human rights observance by African states insofar as poverty alleviation is concerned.

In conclusion, the book is useful and is recommended to all government officials responsible for poverty alleviation, human rights and socio-economic rights scholars, students and every person interested in understanding the outlook of the human rights system in Africa and how thus far it has navigated the issue of poverty.