

Recension: Energy Justice Across Borders, from Ubuntu and other perspectives

Citation for published version (APA):

Bombaerts, G. (2021). Recension: Energy Justice Across Borders, from Ubuntu and other perspectives. In *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* (4 ed., Vol. 2, pp. 173-178). Presses de l'Université Catholique du Congo.

Document status and date:

Published: 01/12/2021

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

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Cahiers
des Religions
Africaines

Autorisation de l'Autorité Gouvernementale :

J.J. KANDE, Ministre de l'information, Kinshasa, le 25 juillet 1967.

Autorisation reconduite par le com. d'Etat à l'Orientation Nationale,
SAKOMBI Inongo, le 7 mai 1973.

Autorisation de l'Autorité Ecclésiastique :

Joseph MALULA, Archevêque de Kinshasa, le 13 juillet 1967.

Presses de l'Université Catholique du Congo

E-mail : cera@ucc.ac.cd

Site : www.ucc.ac.cd

Dépôt légal : 30190-5792

ISBN : 978-2-38053-010-0

Cahiers des Religions Africaines

Nouvelle série. Volume 2, n. 4 (décembre 2021)

PRESSES DE L'UNIVERSITE CATHOLIQUE DU CONGO

Recension

Energy Justice Across Borders, from Ubuntu and other perspectives

Energy Justice Across Borders, Springer Open, 2020, 319

p. Volume edited by GUNTER BOMBAERTS (Eindhoven University of Technology, The Netherlands), KIRSTIN JENKINS (University of Edinburgh, UK), YEKEEN A. SANUSI (Federal University of Technology, Nigeria) and WANG GUOYU (Fudan University, China).

It starts from the observation that our energy systems are truly international, and yet even now, our energy policies tend to be grounded at the national level and in many instances, remain ill-equipped to tackle transboundary energy issues. Our energy policy systems are also largely detached from the concerns of ethics or justice. It follows that we must find new and innovative ways of not conceptualising these normative issues, but of operationalising response to them.

This book stems from the emergent gap: the need for comparative approaches to energy justice, and for those that consider non-Western ethical traditions. The book gives the context to the concept of “energy justice” itself and outlines a comparative philosophical approach to it, focusing specifically on “global philosophy” for its role in dialectically engaging with philosophies from around the world. The different chapters of the volume contribute to this purpose in four parts: setting the scene, practice, applying theory to practice and theoretical approaches. The book provides reflections on the contribution of global philosophy approaches to energy justice as with a set of future research recommendations. Through these recommendations, and all of those within, the book is positioned as one that contributes to energy justice scholarship across borders of nations, borders of ways of thinking and borders of disciplines. Contributions deal with aboriginal ethics and land use in Australia, Kazakh ethical traditions and nuclear energy, gender issues and Hindu Philosophy in Indian energy systems, Chinese philosophy approaches to the concept of energy and to the construction of community with a shared future for mankind. The volume also contains three contributions within an African focus.

A first contribution by Gudina Terefe Tucho (Jimma University, Ethiopia) states that access to modern energy is vital to societal wellbeing and to economic development. Still, the majority of rural households in developing countries do not have access to improved energy systems for basic household energy services. Many energy policies have been devised and several energy projects have been implemented to improve the access. However, many of these policies and energy projects were not successful due to the socioeconomic, cultural, resource and technical conditions present in particular contexts. Major barriers were attributed to the weak understanding of local contexts and societal needs. Nevertheless, some projects considering local social needs through innovative approaches were successful. Hence, improving access to improved energy technology needs to understand local contexts, linking to income generation activities and poverty alleviation and inclusion of women to benefit from the system. A bottom-up approach is sustainable to increase energy access while contributing to poverty alleviation and livelihood improvement.

A second contribution by Giuseppe Pellegrini-Masini (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway), Fausto Corvino (Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Italy) and Lars Löfqvist (Uppsala University, Sweden) discusses how both contractualism, in the Western tradition, and communitarianism, in the African interpretation based on the idea of *Ubuntu*, conceptualise intergenerational justice. Even though both philosophical theories, taking into account differences and shortcomings, provide theoretical answers to intergenerational justice dilemmas, the implementation of actual policies in the interest of future individuals does not follow straightforwardly. Accordingly, in the second part of the chapter, this contribution analyses what policy tools have been implemented or conceived to deliver intergenerational justice and it advocates a pragmatic approach pointing towards a mix of different policy tools.

The authors state that “the question of how future generations should be included in the group of individuals whose rights and duties should be taken into consideration in energy justice cannot be answered in a simple way. They showed that the philosophical underpinnings of future generations’ rights face significant challenges. The various branches of contractualism (David Gauthier, Thomas Scanlon, John Rawls) struggle to find a coherent formulation of an intergenerational contract that both fits with our considered intuitions on human motivation and the plausibility of the contractual metaphor. The *Ubuntu* concept of a shared community, which

is for many scholars intuitively fitting for human social relations, cannot circumvent trade-off situations and does not provide processes for managing such trade-offs.

Indicating the limitations of their philosophical underpinnings, their intuitions are relatively stable. It is few who deny that future generations have some moral worth and that our contemporary actions need to take this worth into account. There are several concrete policy proposals to make our institutions more adaptable to the challenges of long-term complex issues such as climate change. It is thus reasonable to say that the main problem facing intergenerational equity's implementation is not exclusively a philosophical problem, but also a policy one. Despite it being evident that there are problems in the philosophical conceptions of intergenerational justice, it is nevertheless difficult to trace any substantial stance against intergenerational justice in the academic literature, if not perhaps in some minority positions taken by radical contractualist libertarians, who disavow any rights of future generations, because they are considered simply as non-existing subjects. Therefore, in the presence of a reasonably wide agreement in academic and policy circles towards the need of protecting the rights of future generations, demonstrated also by the widely recognised UN sustainable development goals (UN 2015), the main hurdle for implementation rests on the choice of the most effective institutional designs to achieve it. The effectiveness of this might change across different geographical and therefore cultural environments.

The choice of the most effective designs might be a complicated one and to some extent might be also linked to peculiar cultural-political environments. As we observed earlier, a combination of several institutional instruments might be the one that is most likely to deliver some degree of success. What perhaps can be stressed here is that the mere presence of institutional instruments devoted to ensure some degree of protection of future generations' environmental rights is far from being a guarantee that this protection will actually be implemented. A matter that might be paramount is to ensure an effective implementation with regard to the issues of agency and legitimacy of those who can exercise the actions necessary to protect those rights. This point also holds true to the philosophical underpinnings of such institutions. That a concept such as *Ubuntu* can be used to justify care for future generations does not clearly correlate to actual care for those generations. If a contractual interpretation of our responsibility towards future generations is more in tune with public sentiments and motivates this public to take

concrete ways for protecting future generations, there is a pragmatic case in support of this interpretation.

Finally, the relation of specific institutional instruments with the legislative and the judiciary powers is important, as is their ability to hold governments in account. Therefore, broadening the agency base of the actors capable of initiating actions to defend future generations' rights and, at the same time, affording full legitimacy to the institution(s) that should enforce those rights, whether embedding it (or them) in the recognised legislative and/or judiciary powers, seem to be the only choices that could maximise the likelihood of an effective protection of future generations."

A third contribution by Yekeen A. Sanusi (Federal University of Technology, Nigeria) and Andreas Spahn (Eindhoven University of Technology, the Netherlands) aimed to understand the ethical principles that are relevant to the achievement of energy justice; to explore energy marginalization in Africa and to analyse this marginalization from the perspectives of Western and *Ubuntu* ethics; to underscore the violation of ethics in renewable energy deployment; and to find means of addressing energy injustice through proper application of the respective ethical principles. Part of the data for the study were sourced from the reports of the Renewable Energy for Twenty-First Century (REN21). It analysed energy marginalization "from two disciplines (philosophy and urban planning) and from two perspectives: one focusing on relevant concepts in the West and the other one starting from the African *Ubuntu* framework. Their attempt is a first comparative approach of Western and African perspectives on energy marginalisation.

The authors noted that the West emphasizes the rights and roles of the individual and tends to regard energy ethics a question of justice. This is an important perspective; however, the West might learn from other cultures, such as the African *Ubuntu* ethics to re-evaluate the importance of nature and of community alike.

There are both overlaps and differences between the western and the *Ubuntu* perspectives. The most striking difference lies in the relative importance of the community in *Ubuntu* framework which is community-focused. It emphasizes communal life. Here, the rights, dignity, obligations and entitlements of the individuals depend on the community. The joy and pain of the individuals are community-based. It emphasizes cooperation rather competition and communality rather than individuality. The chapter by Pellegrini *et alii* in this same volume goes into detail by investigating the different no-

tions of 'justice'—a western individualistic framework as opposed to a more communitarian perspective. We see overlap in the emphasis of ethics in the West and Africa for the needs of people: it is a moral imperative to overcome energy poverty and to allow equal access to opportunity, both for currently living people and with regard to future people. Another striking difference might lie in a different view on 'nature' within Africa and the West, even though this difference relates more to an underlying cultural interpretation of the role of nature and is difficult to pinpoint it down to very specific, empirically observable differences in the concrete field of implementation and development of renewable energy production. However, we would argue that the 'nature as resource' view, which is quite common in the West, needs to be overcome since one can argue that it rests on a problematic metaphysics of nature and since it may stand in the way of further developing an environmental ethics that goes beyond anthropocentric conceptions. Another striking difference is in the realm of formality of the two frameworks. The individuality philosophy has been allowed to permeate the practical life of the people; it has been made to be reflected in the institutions of the state and in the conduct of the people. This cannot be said of the *Ubuntu* philosophy. Its influence on institutions is limited, while its application among people is only informal. While progress is achieved at both formal and informal levels, the difficulty of enforcement of basic rules under informal arrangement in the modern times undermines the utility of the *Ubuntu* framework.

Taking these findings into account, the authors suggest the following questions for further research in comparative philosophy.

They argue that two strands of comparative work are needed in the future. The first one concerns the level of conceptual analysis and is mainly a task for philosophy and the humanities: What are the similarities and differences between Western and African frameworks? How do e.g. religions in the West conceptualize notions of individuality, nature and community and how does this relate to African interpretations of these same notions? Where do we find common emphasis and where do we find striking differences?

The second strand of research question requires the work of empirical social scientists: If we are able to identify differences in philosophical and ethical conceptualizations, how do these in turn affect energy politics in the real world? How much of the decision making is currently influenced by widely held beliefs about what the value of nature is, what the core of human existence entails and how communities are understood"?

As such, the edited volume has been one of the first attempts to use several ethical frameworks, including *Ubuntu*, to apply to a typical global technical development as energy provision. It invited scholars over the world, again including *Ubuntu*-scholars, to continue the dialogue on energy justice and other technological innovations across borders.

I sincerely hope this volume contributes, and keeps on contributing, to this dialogue. The Edited volume can freely be downloaded via <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-24021-9>

Gunter Bombaerts

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