



World regional and cultural footprints and environmental sustainability: Analysis of socioeconomic determinants

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BOOK REVIEW

World regional and cultural footprints and environmental sustainability: Analysis of socioeconomic determinants, by Ebenezer O. Aka, Jr, Lanham, Hamilton, 2017, 368 pp., US\$80.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-7618-6864-4, US\$76.00 (ebook), ISBN 978-0-7618-6865-1. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780761868644/World-Regional-and-Cultural-Footprints-and-Environmental-Sustainability-Analysis-of-Socioeconomic-Determinants/>.

Environmental sustainability has become a prime issue in the minds of the public as well as political and religious leaders in many parts of the world. As such, dealing with environmental sustainability has become part of the fiduciary responsibility of all those inhabiting our Earth. In addition, the issue has assumed a planetary dimension as unprecedented urban growth, associated with a global population projected to exceed nine billion, has emerged as a global driver of environmental change on multiple frontiers, across local, regional and global scales. This also reflects how deeply intertwined and increasingly pressing are global environmental challenges. These include terrestrial, atmospheric and aquatic pollution; land-cover change; biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation; and exacerbated climate change and uneven distribution of its impacts. *World Regional and Cultural Footprints and Environmental Sustainability*, by Ebenezer Aka, with plentiful theoretical discussions and empirical research, is another significant attempt to stimulate more sustainable and inclusive global futures via social, political and economic transformations. The comprehensive policy recommendations included at the end of each chapter also add value for a wider audience.

Starting with the widely accepted view that 'what we do to our environment, ultimately we do to ourselves' (p. xiii), the book provides readers with a data-driven account of the inequitable distribution of the world's ecological footprints. Ecological footprints can be defined as the impact of human activities measured in terms of the area of biologically productive land and water required to produce the goods consumed and to assimilate the wastes generated. The book conveys a clear message: think globally but act locally if one's aim is to mitigate the effects of global drivers of environmental change. The empirical dimension of the book, alongside detailed methodology subsections, is a clear strength in comparison with recent studies. Through the application of quantitative methods of research, such as comparative model analysis, cross-cultural analysis and multiple regression, the socioeconomic determinants of ecological footprints are analyzed in African countries (chapter 5), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (chapter 6), Latin America and Caribbean countries (chapter 7), Middle East and Central Asia countries (chapter 8), and Asia-Pacific countries (chapter 9). In addition to the explanations of the pathways for achieving environmental sustainable development across various cultures, the book informs,

for example, how progress towards sustainable development can be assessed through the human development index. The author, in a more objective manner, also incorporates the limitations of his assumptions, proxies and variables in deriving the proximate footprints of socioeconomic determinants in the focus areas of the study. This is another positive aspect of the book. In such extensive quantitative assessment, it is an effective approach to acknowledge that analyses across nations can be influenced by missing information or data availability. This methodological approach, combined with the outspoken attitude of the author, increases the book's analytical integrity and contribution to the existing literature.

Recent studies support the acknowledgement that complacency and hopelessness are no longer options to secure a sustainable future. The author reiterates that 'in the process of economic growth' humans continue to 'abuse of the earth's resources' (p. 4). He adds that other determinants, beside economic-oriented interests, have hindered sustainability progress. A lack of political will on what to do to firmly secure and maintain sustainable development patterns is identified as a prime factor. The book improves both the theoretical underpinnings and policy approach of environmental sustainability with an all-encompassing discussion about the possible advantages of addressing global environmental challenges from a regional perspective. The author advocates adopting a more regionally based approach to environmental governance and policy-making independently of the geographical scale and cultural dimension. Therefore, with this feature, the book can be evaluated also as a guide for planning professionals 'to facilitate their sustainable planning and development efforts' (p. 5).

The book is composed of 10 chapters, a prologue and an epilogue providing a summary of the forces that hinder the progress and promotion of sustainability around the world. All the chapters are structured in a similar manner incorporating an introduction, purpose of the study, geographical focus of the chapter, theoretical framework and methodology employed, followed by hypotheses, policy recommendations and conclusions. This chapter structure facilitates a rapid consultation of the content and helps readers to follow the cross-case analyses. The first chapter sets the scene for the following chapters by providing theoretically supported definitions of concepts such as environmental footprint analysis, ecological footprint accounts and sustainable development. However, the author could have referred to more recent debates and thus provide alternative definitions to well-known terms such as sustainability and sustainable development. For example, many types of big data generated online, the ubiquitous technology at our fingertips, and user-generated content and geolocated data from social media promise to expand our understanding not only of where people are and in which activities they are engaged, but also what they value. Human behaviour and values are, therefore, critical to align sustainability planning and regional environmental policies with the needs and interests of inhabitants. In chapters 2–4, the author debates today's tight interconnectedness between the economy, environmental and ecological degradation, and sustainability by using comparative modelling and descriptive


statistics. According to the author, ‘currently national ecological deficits are becoming an ever-increasing liability to the competitive position of national economies’ (p. 45). Although this is not a new thought, the author reinforces the point that, instead of allowing growth to come to a halt by itself, society should seek purposefully to achieve equilibrium by: (1) maintaining a consistent conservation policy, (2) developing educational programmes targeting the youthful individuals and (3) implementing growth management policies. In this regard, the author misses the opportunity to debate the challenges of financing sustainability management programmes and the existing power relations between profit and non-profit organizations. Recent studies disclose that interactions between governments, civil society and private company actors are mainly antagonistic regarding the adoption of sustainable practices.

In the empirically rich chapters 5–10, the author critically debates the socioeconomic causes of ecological footprints across different regional geographies. For example, in African countries, the prime socioeconomic determinants of ecological footprints are carbon dioxide emissions and exponential population growth, while in OECD countries public expenditure is identified as a chief socioeconomic determinant of ecological footprints. In Latin America, Middle East and Asia-Pacific countries, gender-related disparities, reduced public expenditure in environmental policies and an increase in urban population are the major ecological footprint contributors. The reality uncovered by these chapters is that a place-based approach to sustainability commitments is required to tackle environmental disruption and its structural causes.

The book is useful reading for those involved in addressing environmental issues and implementing strategies aimed at a secure and more ecologically balanced and sustainable future. However, the author could have also paved a way for future research. For example, new partnerships and governance arrangements between governments, private companies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are reshaping global environmental sustainability. Specifically, governments are increasingly engaged in private governance and attempts to regain partial control of standards designed by NGOs to promote sustainability. Whether this commitment will lead to more effective sustainability management measures, more prolific public–private partnerships to promote sustainability, or an enlightening of innovations in private governance arrangements still needs to be researched. These drawbacks, 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 explanations of the determinants that hinder sustainability progress.

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