

## BOOK REVIEW

Vasu Reddy, Narnia Bohler-Muller, Zitha Mokomane, and Crain Soudien, eds. 2024. *State of the Nation: Quality of Life and Wellbeing in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press. 347 pp. Index. \$59.97. Paper. ISBN: 9780796926630.

This volume comes at a critical time in South Africa's history. Considering the passage of three decades after independence, there is a need for a critical relook at the essence of the South African dream and how it can be linked to the general experiences of ordinary citizens. Through a critical reevaluation of various aspects of life, the authors manage to carefully synthesize the hopes of South Africa by looking at the foundational concepts of quality of life and well-being. The book is a brave and ambitious project that discusses some of the most relative and polysemic concepts of the human condition. The vastness of life and the diversity of concepts such as quality of life, well-being, happiness, and satisfaction, among others, present complexities that the authors have skillfully articulated and condensed to offer a coherent case study of the interaction between the state, individual, and communal aspirations. The edited volume covers a wide range of issues including conceptualizing quality of life and well-being, specific aspects of well-being such as environmental rights, mental health, happiness, socioeconomic factors, as well as peace and human security.

The volume is divided into four central themes that attempt to answer critical questions about the trajectory in contemporary South Africa. The first theme conceptualizes and contextualizes quality of life through different lenses of understanding wellness as well as drawing important linkages to issues of politics and governance. There is an excellent enmeshing of structural aspects (politics, governance) and personal experience (freedom, happiness, well-being). The chapter by Reddy *et al.* provides a sufficient theoretical base by interrogating the various facets of quality of life and well-being. Whilst the following chapters integrate and enmesh the concepts of well-being and quality of life, there might be a need to rearrange the articles according to their interrogation of theoretical and philosophical questions. The second chapter could be pushed to the end of the section since it does not deal mostly with the theoretical issues but addresses a specific issue related to well-being and quality of life.

The second theme, entitled "Economics," addressed multiple dimensions of quality of life and well-being. The three papers in this section address behavioral aspects of economic behavior, circulation of wealth in the context of internal migration and remittances, and the quality of life through the lens of globalization and the position of South Africa in an international market system. Though the book breathes fresh perspectives on the noneconomic aspects of well-being, a glimpse into the economic side presents linkages between existing economic

foundations and broader sociopolitical aspects of quality of life and well-being. The section addresses economic issues in a way that skirts around economic determinism in measuring and understanding well-being. Whilst the section offers important insights, there is a noticeable change in the writing style of the last two papers, whose format could be modelled in a captivating manner that captures the readers' attention.

The third part, entitled "Society, Culture Identity and Public Good" is a longer section with six chapters. They address various themes that include mental health, vaccines, politics and democracy, space, as well as arts and culture. The section attempts to provide a comprehensive focus on multiple aspects of the human condition that influence quality of life and well-being. It presents rich diversity and interesting cases of looking at multiple ways of confronting well-being in contemporary South Africa. Two articles in the section focus on mental health and quality of life, another focuses on health access through the lens of access to vaccines whilst another contribution contextualizes well-being under democracy and politics. Perhaps this is one of the outstanding contributions in addressing the political and governance dimensions of the "state of the nation." The second last chapter of the section interrogates time-space dynamics of well-being and quality of life. The chapter masterfully articulates well-being and the "state of the nation" by focusing on how the quality of life is influenced by access and ownership of land and property. The final chapter of the section discusses quality of life and well-being in the arts sector. The chapter dissects arts, expression, and access to public space in contemporary South Africa.

Part Four concludes by presenting two chapters—one focuses on gender inequalities in South Africa and the other attempts a comparative approach of juxtaposing the South African and Nigerian experiences of understanding peace and well-being. Although the section introduces important insights on human security, gender, peace, and well-being, it is rather brief. It could further be enriched by more perspectives that draw from the South African political landscape. Perhaps a concluding chapter could be useful in tying up the various discussions raised by different chapter contributions whilst offering a clear path on the future of the state of the nation series. Overall, the book is an important contribution to one of the contentious topics of scholarly discourse and is valuable in most social sciences, arts and humanities. Though the focus has been on the South African state, there are several questions that are important to young democracies in Africa and beyond. The transdisciplinary nature of the book is also important in synchronizing diverse knowledge discourses that address well-being and the human condition.

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[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.206](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.206)