

11-1-2010

Tanja Winter. *The Impact of Electricity: Development, Desires and Dilemmas*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008.

Rosemary Fumpa-Makano Ph.D.
Zambia Catholic University, rose.makano@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fumpa-Makano, Rosemary Ph.D. (2010) "Tanja Winter. *The Impact of Electricity: Development, Desires and Dilemmas*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 2: No. 1, Article 9.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1041

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol2/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Tanja Winter. *The Impact of Electricity: Development, Desires and Dilemmas*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008.

In *The Impact of Electricity*, Tanja Winter creatively merges project evaluation with policy analysis. As a power engineer, it would have been natural for Tanja Winter to focus on evaluating the technical aspects and the “hardware” of the rural electrification project in Uroa village, Zanzibar, and if she had done so, the project would have scored a resounding ‘success’: it was implemented as planned and on time. However, Winter not only looks more deeply at many of the “softer” aspects of the project and highlights its socio-economic impacts (which were the central focus of the project), she also delves into the cultural, political, and religious dimensions and ramifications of the project itself.

Written in uncomplicated anthropological style, Winter leaves no stone unturned in her efforts to highlight issues and concerns that have arisen in this small community of Uroa village since the successful completion of the rural electrification project. On the surface, the project seems to have created no problems, but Winter sees beyond the technical success of the project as she delves in the social-cultural and religious realms, in which multiple concerns seem to have arisen. Tanja Winter provides practical lessons on how, despite being implemented with the best of intentions, nearly all policy interventions tend to yield unintended consequences.

Dr. Winter provides an excellent analysis of the ways in which the arrival of electricity in rural Zanzibar has generated a cocktail of outcomes—some intended and others unintended (some good and others not so great) (Chapter 5). She explains how the availability of electricity is slowly but steadily, transforming rural Zanzibar life—values, ideas and aspirations—in ways neither the policy makers nor development agents may have envisioned. This transformation brings with it a new set of challenges for development agents and policy makers alike. For instance, while electricity has improved communication, the provision of public services (water, health and education), and increased the number of working hours per day, it is feared that these changing work priorities might lead to food insecurity in Uroa village. More people are spending less time on land to grow food and more time on fishing (men) and seaweed production (mostly women). Furthermore, the social and economic vulnerability of the local people is likely to increase as tangible benefits from industries such as tourism, which are dominated by “foreigners,” appear not to be trickling down to the poor. In short, electricity has had limited impact in improving local people’s capabilities to generate income. Indeed, the increased desire for property ownership, socio-economic advancement, and a connection to the wider world as a result of the availability of electricity is closely linked to changes in the political landscape.

Although this book is about Uroa village in Zanzibar, Winter competently reflects on other similar rural electrification projects (Chapter 11), including the Soviet rural electrification program, the United States’ Tennessee Valley Authority, and township electricity programs in South Africa and Zambia. This comparative reflection is essential; it underscores how the advent of electricity influences local communities in different ways. In some, electricity facilitates community development, while in others the resource becomes the problem itself. However, whatever the situation, one thing is evident: electricity has become one of the most vivid symbols of modernization and development. It is generally understood to be the real connection (if not passage) to the modern world and way of life. Electricity is an “enlightenment motif” and clearly a

“compelling symbol of inclusion” (p. 217-18) in modern lifestyle. Naturally, regardless of one’s social status, these perceptions and expectations run deep in Uroa village.

From a developmental angle, *The Impact of Electricity* comes at the right time, when most efforts are geared toward enhancing economic development in the Third World as part of the global (millennium) agenda to reduce the North-South divide. The availability and access to affordable energy such as electricity has been identified and continues to be one of the major constraints to Third World development. Inadequate or lack of energy affects food production, which subsequently leads to food insecurity in many Third World countries. Therefore, availability of and access to electricity or other forms of energy have wider implications with respect to the attainment of the millennium development goals on education, poverty alleviation, etc. As Dr. Winter points out, although these connections are not very well researched, it is evident that electricity does contribute positively to human development. She claims, “Poverty appears to be linked to people’s limited access to electricity,” and that accessing this resource “at affordable prices is a vital condition for increasing poor people’s well-being and producing national economic growth” (Winter, 2008, p.1).

The Impact of Electricity is a unique and remarkably written study. It brings home what most project evaluators overlook: a project’s impact on the “soft” elements of society that enable those communities to function normally. The arrival of electricity in Uroa village has clearly brought a mixed bag of outcomes. It has not only changed how these people organize their daily chores and commitments, but it has also caused profound changes in the local practices and perceptions, particularly relating to property ownership, cultural and religious beliefs, social status, and networks. Clearly, in Winter’s assessment, the rich are getting more out of this resource than the poorest of the poor.

The Impact of Electricity: Development, Desires and Dilemmas is a must read for all development agents, policy makers, project evaluators, social science scholars, and their students. This study covers much more than most project evaluations bring to the table.

Rosemary Fumpa-Makano, Ph.D.
Zambia Catholic University
rose.makano@gmail.com