



# JOURNAL ON EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

---

Book Review: The Outcast Majority: War, Development, and Youth in Africa by Marc Sommers

Author(s): Susan Shepler

Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol 2, No 1 (December 2016), pp 157-159

Published by: Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/39652>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17609/N82Q0P>

## REFERENCES:

This is an open-source publication. Distribution is free of charge. All credit must be given to authors as follows:

Shepler, Susan. 2016. "Book Review: The Outcast Majority: War, Development, and Youth in Africa by Marc Sommers." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 2(1): 157-159.

---

The *Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE)* publishes groundbreaking and outstanding scholarly and practitioner work on education in emergencies (EiE), defined broadly as quality learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocation, higher and adult education.

Copyright © 2017, Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies.



The Journal on Education in Emergencies published by the [Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#), except where otherwise noted.

## BOOK REVIEW

*THE OUTCAST MAJORITY: WAR, DEVELOPMENT, AND YOUTH IN AFRICA*

BY MARC SOMMERS

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS, 2015. IX + 248 PAGES

\$74.95 (HARDCOVER), \$26.95 (PAPER)

ISBN 978-0-8203-4885-8

Anthropologist Marc Sommers has spent decades thinking and writing about youth in Africa, frequently while working as a consultant for government and NGO clients. He has written about Education for All in conflict-affected countries for the World Bank, about schooling in South Sudan for UNESCO, and about peace education for refugee youth for the United Nations Refugee Agency. His books include *Fear in Bongoland*, which is about Burundian refugees living in urban Tanzania, and *Stuck*, which describes the barriers Rwandan youth face trying to attain adulthood. In *The Outcast Majority*, he has brought these strands together and written a career-summarizing book. The book details the vast gap between outcast youth in war-affected Africa and the international development enterprise.

Sommers starts with the premise that large populations of young people are not a problem, but their alienation is. His basic argument is that, despite being the majority in almost all African countries, young people are excluded socially, economically, and politically. Finding a way to support them requires “an understanding of the marginalization, exclusion, and sense of alienation that so many experience” (5). He believes that if one listens to these young people, they will reveal their own notions of what it means to become a successful adult and what barriers they face to achieving their goals. He writes, “The way forward is straightforward: uncovering the priorities and potential of ordinary youth before fashioning responses to them” (4).

Sommers then turns to the range of development activities carried out for African youth in post-conflict contexts, including education (in emergencies and otherwise) and job-creation programs. He includes interviews with development experts, who agree with Sommers that the current way of doing things is not working. By juxtaposing interviews with donors and NGO workers and his own decades of quality ethnographic research on youth across the continent, Sommers successfully bridges policy and ethnography.

There is much to like in this book. It includes a great deal of ethnographic detail about the lives of African youth drawn from Sommers' decades of fieldwork. He cites examples from Rwanda, Burundi, the DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. He claims that helping the same elite youth over and over again leads to unintended results, such as amplifying the inequality the programs are meant to address and enabling "the favored few [to] reap unjust rewards" (2). This critique of the idea that helping any youth is better than helping no youth is especially insightful. I appreciate that, instead of simply repeating the mantra "participation," his advice for avoiding the common problem of working almost exclusively with elite youth is to work with the "bad boys." I also appreciate his recommendation to advocate with governments and take political action for young people, noting that youth development work too often props up the very regimes that exclude youth.

Some pieces of the book are less useful. For example, Sommers attempts a kind of genealogy of the "program" concept and the drive for quantitative measures of impact, going back to Robert McNamara's 1960s tenure as U.S. secretary of defense and World Bank president. I found that his critiques of development as applied to the conflict-affected youth sector—particularly of short donor timelines, project-based interventions, and the tabulating focus of monitoring and evaluation—are well established elsewhere and thus not a particularly novel contribution.

I want to comment here on my experience using the book as a key text in my master's-level course "Youth and Conflict" during the spring 2016 semester. Students enjoyed Sommers' provocative and honest assessment of development work, but the geographic scope of the work was too broad for my students, given their insufficient knowledge of the multiple African contexts he presents. Sommers jumps around the continent, and the fine-grained detail of his argument was lost when students perceived the action as taking place in an undifferentiated Africa.

The book is really a plea for changes to current practice. Sommers aims to alter the way donors and agencies conceptualize their work with youth in conflict-affected settings in Africa. To this end, he includes a kind of manifesto at the end of the book, titled "Toward Youth Inclusion: A Framework for Change," which consists of 16 clear recommendations for policymakers and practitioners. The book's greatest contribution lies in bringing together deep ethnographic work on conflict-affected youth in Africa and interviews with people in the aid world. Together, these details and voices demonstrate the mismatch between policy

## BOOK REVIEW

imperatives and the experiences and goals of young women and men across the African continent. *The Outcast Majority* distills decades of work on these issues and provides a clear call to action for the field. My master's students enjoyed the book, and I am sure it will be appreciated by policy-makers and practitioners as well.

**SUSAN SHEPLER**  
*American University*

*The views expressed here are the author's  
and do not represent American University.*

*For permission to reuse, please contact [journal@ineesite.org](mailto:journal@ineesite.org).*