As its title suggests, this tidy volume published in 2005 brings together the key human rights documents of the African Union (‘AU’), focusing on the instruments which establish the core standards and institutions of the African human rights system. In each case, the instrument included is introduced with a summary of relevant facts surrounding its adoption and entry into force.

In its first part (pp. 1-93), the volume includes key instruments of the overarching institutional basis of the African human rights framework, with the foundational documents establishing the AU, beginning with the Charter of the Organization of African Unity (‘OAU’) (1963), through the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community (1991) and the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000). The instruments that create the normative basis of African human rights framework are reproduced in their entirety, from the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1981), and the 1998 and 2003 Protocols thereto, (establishing the African Court and on the Rights of Women respectively), to the OAU Refugee Convention (1969), the Cultural Charter (1976), the African Children’s Charter (1990) and the African Convention on the Conservation of Nature (2003). In addition to these binding instruments, the Compendium contains relevant soft law instruments, such as the Kigali Declaration (2003) and the Guidelines for Electoral Observation Missions (2004). The inclusion of a full range of soft law materials adds a valuable dimension to the tome by complementing the collection of core binding documents, and in doing so, including documents that might be less likely come by, thereby underscoring the comprehensive nature of the Compendium.

In relation to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the second part of the Compendium (pp. 95-242) reproduces key resolutions passed by the Commission which address procedural issues, but also serve a substantive function of giving further definition to the standards of the African Charter. This section also includes highlights of the Commission’s decisions, which in most cases, include a summary of the facts, complaint, procedure, merits and the Commission’s conclusion. Included in this section of the book are the Commission’s Rules of Procedure (1995), Guidelines for National Periodic Reports Under the African Charter (1998), and a Sample of Concluding Observations on a Periodic Report (2001).

The documents of the third part of the book (pp. 243-267) have a substantive focus on development, the inclusion of which in a collection of human rights documents is significant, particularly in the African context. These include the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (‘NEPAD’) Declaration (2001), the Declaration on Democracy, Political,
Economic and Corporate Governance (2002) and the African Peer Review Mechanism: Base Document (2003), as well as the Country Self-assessment for the African Peer Review Mechanism (2004). The substantive content of this part of the collection conveys an understanding of the link between human rights and development, and the notion that development partnerships have human rights consequences and a critical role to play in the realization of human rights. Among the ‘bonus features’ included in this third part of the book is a very useful AU Organogram which illustrates the operational structures that govern and implement the Compendium’s instruments, highlighting also the relationships between the various organs and processes that together ensure the functioning of the African human rights system. From an international lawyer’s perspective, the complete chart of ratifications of AU human rights treaties is a welcome feature and, underscoring its practical orientation, the Compendium includes a model communication form for individual complaints under the African Charter for the Commission (although the form is not an official AU document). The tome also has a list of relevant website addresses and a select bibliography of the leading publications on African human rights law with full citations. Finally, this part of the Compendium highlights the ‘profiles’ of the University for Peace and the Centre for Human Rights in the University of Pretoria.

The Compendium comprises 267 pages of well-organized materials in a convenient paperback format and clear typeset. Its table of contents is well ordered, employing ‘institutional affiliation’ as the way to organize the instruments under three general categories: the Organization of African Unity/African Union, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights and New Partnership for Africa’s Development. This is a highly comprehensive collection of materials, which departs in some ways from the traditional format of collections of treaties and official documents, but extremely useful for that. The breadth and eclectic nature of its contents render it an inclusive and highly original collection. However, an arguable lack of selectivity going beyond official documents may limit its use in certain circles and lead some to question the accuracy of its title denoting ‘key’ documents.

The Compendium of Key Human Rights Documents of the African Union remains a valuable piece of work which helps advance the understanding of a body of international law which has undeniable and growing importance, both in its own right and as it pertains to development in Africa. As the African system continues to evolve and mature, particularly with the operation of the Court since the entry into force of its founding protocol in 2004 and its first meeting since 2006, reliance on collected materials such as these can only increase. In addition, the 2005 approved draft instrument on the merger of the Commission and Court into a single, rather than bifurcated, system, will increase reliance on resources like these and the cause demand for them to grow in order to help navigate the evolving African human rights system. More generally, as attention continues to focus on Africa, works like this will remain essential resources and natural point of reference for analysis and evaluation. In sum, this is an extremely worthwhile collection, which will be a valuable resource for practitioners and academics.