

MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN OVERCOMING POVERTY IN AFRICA

Michael T. Katola¹, Bernard Gechiko Nyabwari²

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kenyatta University,
KENYA.

¹mtkatola@yahoo.com, ²nyabwako@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Poverty makes people to lack certain amount of material possessions necessary to meet their basic human needs: food, shelter and clothing. In Africa poverty is as a result of economic inequality influenced by poor leadership and underutilization of the available resources. This paper mainly focuses on the mission of the church in overcoming poverty in Africa. It is rightly argued that as the society's conscious voice, the church's role should be to advocate for leadership that seeks to emancipate Africans. The paper analyses the poor in the Christian perspective arguing that as Jesus Christ provided for the poor and the oppressed, the church should equip the poor with skills to bring them out of their poverty situations. The paper illuminates the five signs of poverty in Africa; hunger, inadequate income, dehumanization, injustice and diseases. These phenomena in Africa are clear indicators of leadership which fails to address the social, economic, political and physical needs of the people. The poverty situations of the people as the paper concludes demands intervention of the church in two ways: providing leadership which addresses the people's needs and raising the voice of the poor to the leaders in government positions. Data were collected from African scholars conversant with religion and political matters of Africa. Further analysis of articles in journals and books on poverty situations in Africa was done to supplement the primary data. The paper shows that poverty can be overcome through the church's participation in providing competent leadership and partnering with the government in empowering the poor in Africa with skill to utilize available resources.

Keywords: Poverty, resources, leadership, opportunities, interventions

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a global phenomenon. In wealthy and technologically advanced nations like the U.S.A. poverty thrives mainly in urban areas while in virtually all the poor, developing countries it is found in both urban and rural areas.

Poverty is viewed differently by different countries but there is consensus that it means that some people are denied minimum levels of health, food and education. For a poor family in the U.S.A poverty can mean long working hours in a factory, low wages and no holidays. For a family in Kenya, poverty can mean the absence of the services of a medical doctor or lack of food, clothing and shelter.

Many scholars like Kinoti (1994) and Mwereke (1996) concur that millions of Africans are compelled to live in constant misery and suffering by forces either within or outside their control. Aseka (1996) equally articulates this view by saying that of the world population, about one sixth of them live in Africa whereby 300 million already live below the poverty line. Sharing the same opinion, Handerson (1971) states that the majority of the people in Africa live in rural areas and so it is in these areas that poverty is more flourishing and

glaring. The people exist without adequate food, equipment, modern skills, decent homes, schools, hospitals and doctors.

Attempts to solve the problems of poverty are required because as Kinoti (1994) elucidates, poverty is the most pressing of all African's many depressing problems be they social, spiritual or moral. This implies that all Christians have a moral responsibility to do their best to correct the situation.

This paper focuses on the way African leaders have contributed to the prevailing poverty which oppresses and disgrace the Africans who were created in the image of God. The paper concludes that the church should be in the forefront to face leaders who are responsible for the poverty situation in Africa. Only in this way will Africans be rescued form the disgrace of being poor people.

The Poor in Christian Perspective

Poverty is popularly defined as the condition people fall into when their incomes goes below an absolute poverty line, that is, the level considered obsolete necessary for meeting certain minimum nutritional and other needs (Blanc, 1992).

In the developing world, most of the people survive the hard way. In fact in Sub-Sahara Africa about half of the population live below the poverty line where adequate feeding, clothing and housing are barely met (Aseka 1996). These poor people can be polarized into two different groups. The first group includes the marginalized. Ordinarily, the marginalized are not within the existing economic system. These are the jobless or partly employed and the whole gamut of the wretched: beggars, abandoned children, prostitutes among others. All these people live deprived of the basic necessities of life namely food, water and shelter.

The second group includes the exploited. These are people whom the socio-economic system treats unjustly. They include the working poor who live either in the city or in the rural areas. These are the kind of people who live in "favelas", shanty towns build of discarded wood, flattened tins, cans and cardboard boxes in greater Rio de Janeiro (Development and Cooperation 1984). In Kenya these category of people live in shacks which they shamefully call "houses".

The issue of the poor is a concern of everyone today but mostly the Christians. Christianity would be incomplete if it were to ignore the plight of the poor and the justice due to them. Boff and Pixley (1989) say that through a better understanding of the poor the church would know its divine founder and Lord better because the poor are the sacrament of Christ. This argument implies that the classical image of the poor as a ragged figure begging for a crust from door to door is something that should be replaced with a less romantic and more realistic image of the poor.

In the Bible God is portrayed as taking sides with the poor and the oppressed. The Exodus account explains how God heard the cries of the Israelites in captivity and so came down to save and lead them to a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses who was the architect behind the exodus event had earned his qualifications by jeopardizing his high social position by killing an Egyptian who was molesting a Hebrew (Exodus 2: 11-15). From Moses example it is vivid that justice means taking sides with the oppressed.

The God described above became present in Jesus Christ to set humanity free from all expressions of sin. But it is note worthy that although Jesus came seeking all, his ministry had a significant impact among the poor. The feeding of the five thousands and of the four

thousand, though by no means famine relief, nonetheless tells us that Jesus was concerned with the whole person and not just the spiritual aspects.

An important observation is that Jesus placed himself at the side of the poor in society: the possessed, the lepers, and the homeless. From their side he questioned not so much the power structures, but rather religions traditions which made the poor accept social difference as something inevitable. It should be noted that it was not because poverty is a virtue that Jesus required his followers to lead life of poverty and be ready to serve and to suffer. His message was rather that the coming of the kingdom would make the poor have their fill and those who mourn rejoice (Luke 6: 20-24).

From the life of Jesus, Paul develops the quality which would be called solidarity. In Corinthians 8:9 ff he says that by making himself poor, Jesus opted to enrich those who were down trodden in wretchedness. Paul further noted that the riches Jesus brought to them in this way were not to be the sort of riches that distinguish the rich from the poor, but simply equality for all. He admonished the Corinthians that if there was surplus in one place it could supply the needs of another and one day perhaps that place will have a surplus to supply the needs of others in turn.

From the above observations it is clear that the Bible views poverty as unfair, unjust, oppressive, undesirable and unacceptable. The church should therefore be in the frontline to fight for the welfare of the poor and the needy.

Signs of Poverty in Africa

Kinoti (1984: 15-20) correctly points out five key signs of poverty. The first one is hunger. Experience shows that there is hunger of two kinds. There is hunger caused by starvation that is not having enough food and hunger caused by malnutrition that is having the wrong kind of food. In Africa it is not only the food that is inadequate but there is a very limited range of food available. It is not an exaggeration that a great number of people do not have enough proteins or vitamins in the food they eat. Health professionals particularly dieticians estimate that a sufficient diet should contain at least 30% animal protein yet more than half of Africa's population know only one dish, a basic food like maize.

From a medical point of view, malnutrition results in poor health and weak resistance to infections and diseases. When malnutrition is critical it can impact negatively on a whole community. Henderson (1971) notes that a child born of a mother who is herself underfed will not start life strong and healthy. When the mother stops breastfeeding the child and begins an unbalanced diet, lacking in protein, the child will be prone to diseases and his growth will be constrained.

The second sign of poverty is inadequate income. Poor people have no ability to satisfy their offspring with basic needs like food, clothing, shelter and even education. Poverty entombs people in ignorance and superstition. In Africa the magnitude of poverty is attested by the fact that most of the countries are unable to financially support undertakings like elections or referendums without foreign aid. It is also a fact that small workshops and conferences frequently depend on external funding.

Dehumanization is the third sign of poverty. Poverty and backwardness are the factors behind prejudice and paternalism with which the black person is handled globally. They could also be responsible for the inferiority complex that many Africans feel in the presence of westerners. A sense of inferiority demeans the self-esteem and dignity of an African. It is also a barrier to our material, spiritual and intellectual development since it gives a false picture of our vision. A sense of inferiority views progress as aping the Whiteman's culture, his world

view, his lifestyle, even his names and hair colour. This inferiority has been exploited by companies manufacturing skin-lightening creams and other cosmetics which transform black people particularly black women to look less African and presumably more westernized.

The fourth sign of poverty is in injustice. It is unjust to live in a divided world of the haves and the have nots, of the stark division of the rich and the poor, of the economic oppressors and the oppressed. It is equally unjust for the techno-nations to enjoy a wealth unparalleled in human history when untold millions struggle against the daily deprivation wrought by unending poverty. They are powerless, in poor health, lacking education, constantly weary and dying prematurely.

The problem of poverty is exacerbated in Africa because small elites often hold the majority of the nation's wealth. In fact the global process known as emiseration takes place with particular fierceness in Africa. Emiseration is that process where the rich become both fewer and richer while the poor become poorer and more numerous. Disaster is usually inevitable if the process is not reversed. This problem however seems to be affecting most of the third world countries. In Brazil for example some five per cent of the population holds thirty-eight per cent of the wealth (Houghton 1988). Thus, there is need for distributive justice so that the masses who are the producers can also enjoy the fruits of their labour. It is wrong to have luxury and wasteful consumption existing side by side.

The fifth sign of poverty is disease. It is not an exaggeration that there is a galaxy of infectious and non infectious diseases in Africa. Among the two categories of diseases, the former can be controlled. Infectious diseases are so prevalent largely due to low standard of life and lack of adequate medical services. Some countries are trying to give priority to health services. In spite of this, the statistics given by medical personnel with regard to deaths caused by infectious diseases are heart breaking. Malaria which has been stamped out in developed countries continues to be a major threat in Africa due to poverty.

Relationship between Leadership and Poverty in Africa

There are several factors that could be responsible for African's poverty. This section will only examine governance/leadership as one of the factors that has contributed to the poor state of many African countries.

The economic situation of any nation depends with the political situation since politics and economics are intertwined. Bad government not only keeps a poor country poor but can make a stable and wealthy country to become dilapidated. This problem has been felt in Africa for a long time. Since 1960s many different leaders have been in the helm in various countries. Some of the leaders like Idi Amin of Uganda, Jean Bedel, Bokasa of Central Africa and Samuel Doe of Liberia brushed aside all the democratic institutions and seemed to specialize in human rights abuses, high level corruption, repression, injustice and misuse of public funds and other resources. The named rulers focused on their well being to the point of forgetting to maintain the economic social progress attained in the early years of independence. This poor and undemocratic style of leadership is found in many other countries and has horrified the citizens of all the African countries. Even today the monopoly of national decision making by undemocratic leaders and their cohorts, coupled with corruption and incompetence, has caused horror in the economic and social services of African countries. Stated otherwise, some political leaders in pursuit of individual richness and glory pushes African people to poverty and plays a pivotal role in the underdevelopment of Africa. In most of the African nations civil service is bedeviled by disregard of merit and experience, corruption and poor remuneration, indiscipline and favouritisms. It is therefore easy to understand why the countries have planning development ministries yet no development take place.

In a number of African countries the misuse of public institutions and unprecedented plunder of public funds has become a chronic disease. Many leaders collude with multinational corporations and siphon millions of dollars out of their countries each year through development projects that are not viable for a developing country (Kinoti 1994). Aseka (1996) and Mwereke (1996) equally say that foreign governments and/or banks fund the projects and are usually carried out by foreign companies. Sometimes the project fails but the concerned country must repay the loan together with the accrued interest. No wonder Africa spends five times more on debt than on basic health (Daily Nation, August 17th 1998). This must be the reason that prompted Houghton (1988:57) to say:

The International Monetary Fund was set up ostensibly to assist the funding of developing countries. However, because of the high interest rates, these countries have often been unable to pay off the loans. As a result they have had to borrow at a rate of interest, in order to pay the interest on the first loan. Soon they can't pay this either and have to borrow again - at a rate of interest.

It is evident that African leaders embezzle funds directly from the government ministries, the treasury and parastatals corporations to enrich themselves. These are evidently unwarranted and immoral activities which in Kenya are called "eating". People are hawk-eyed to get into a position from where they can eat. In this regard, public funds that should be nursed and directed to credible development ventures are drained away. Bayart (1993), calls this immoral practice 'La Politique du ventre' (the Politics of the Stomach).

Poor leadership as a matter of fact has been behind unsavory and wide militization of Africa. A lot of money is spent on military equipments while very little is done on urgent and important services like health education and housing. Unfortunately many of those military equipments have been used against African people as witnessed in countries like Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone and the two Congos. African leaders are therefore blameworthy for the massive mismanagement of African economies that causes so much poverty and wretchedness.

Economic power in most African nations is the preserve of the ruler. He uses his power to influence or acknowledge support by giving money or appointing people to coveted public position because they are ethnically or politically correct. This is done without taking the competence of a person into consideration and by denying economic opportunities in those he views as unfaithful. Those in government positions have many ways of acquiring wealth for themselves and their affine at the expense of the economy. It may however be noted that the accumulation of personal wealth is sometimes regarded as a sign of personal prowess. Hynes (1996) shows that Ivoirians tended not to criticize their late president Houphouet Boigny for amassing a huge fortune during his tenure as head of state. They did not ask themselves whether his salary was sufficient to pay for 100 million dollars basilica he built at Yamoussoukro. On the contrary many thought it quite appropriate that political and economic power should coexist.

It may suffice to ask why African church leaders have supported rulers who are responsible for African poverty. Hynes (1996:118) shows that church leaders support the status quo because some religious institutions have been run in a non or anti-democratic way. Some of the leaders understand their jobs in relation to three desirable goals: Wealth, Power and Status. The Catholic Archbishop of Rome, Togo Mgr Dosseh for example was once described as tribalist authoritarian and corrupt. Poverty cannot be wished away while corruption thrives.

The Role of the Church in the Eradication of Poverty in Africa

The picture drawn from the proceeding pages is very gloomy. The people of Africa and more specifically the African Christians must be in the fore front in changing Africa's poor situation. They must be swift to replace poverty and hunger with prosperity, human degradation with human dignity, diseases with health, oppression with freedom, injustice with justice, and conflict with peace (Kinoti 1984:67). If this is to be realized the Christians should ascertain that they grasp the nature and purpose of government. The Bible is categorical that the government as a human and divine institution was ordained by God with a view to regulating human relation for the good of human beings.

It is perplexing that some African Christians consider leaders even those perpetuating poverty as God appointees and therefore as sacred and not accountable to those they rule. The leaders happily solicit support of Christians who are myopic enough to argue that to criticize their policies or actions is to criticize God himself. Such rulers do their best to show that the poverty believing the people have no relationship with their leadership styles. But there is nothing Godly about poverty. Disgusted by such behavior Njoya (1998) argues that political and economic situation in Africa has degenerated over the years because of religious numbness; adding Africans do not need more religion but faith as a context for effective change (Daily Nation August 17th 1998).

It must be pointed out that Christian officials should not shy away from expressing views that can deter any ruler from aggravating African's poverty situation. This is because when a country is under the hands of a bad leader the people suffer poverty among other problems. This being the case, Christians have the responsibility of ensuring good governance. They must go beyond praying and denounce any practices by political leaders that exacerbate poverty in Africa.

The arguments advanced above should not give the impression that the church has been totally silent. In Kenya for example some leaders like Rev. Mutava Musyimi, Archbishop Ndingi Mwana Nzeki, Rev (Dr.) Timothy Njoya and Rev (Dr.) David Gitari have been in the fore front in exposing certain evils that are allergic to the progress of their country. The situation is perhaps not different in other parts of Africa. A human right organization, Christian Against Torture (C.A.T) was founded in Cameroon in 1980s in response to the increasingly repressive measures used by Paul Biya's government against opposition figures. CAT along with universal human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Africa watch, has been influential in helping to focus the international attention on human rights abuses in Cameroon. But much as the Christians have done something we feel that a lot more should be done if poverty is to be minimized in Africa. The challenge then is for African Christians to work harder and ensure that the lives of God's people in Africa are not taken out of them through poverty of our own making.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion it is instructive that no country is immune to poverty. The problem of poverty is however too pronounced in Africa where millions of people die due to lack of certain basic necessities of life. But while there are some natural factors behind poverty, African leaders have been entrenching the problem through bad leadership styles. This is contrary to the will of God who in Christianity is characterized by constant concern for the poor and the oppressed. In view of this, African Christians particularly the church leaders are called upon to become more involved in the welfare and progress of their countries. They are called to point out the evils that leaders allow thriving at the expense of the economy. Only in this way will Africa overcome the problem of poverty which has become synonymous with the continent.

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