

African Research Review

An International *Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*

Vol. 7 (4), Serial No. 31, September, 2013:274-287

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.7i4.17>

Christian Church: A Catalyst for Economic Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The issue of economic development is of national concern. The Nigerian economy had a truncated history from independence to present times and the economy has suffered series of economic instability because of a long period of unsustainable growth in the per capital real income of the country, accompanied by lack of fundamental changes in the structure of the economy. The government of Nigeria has a significant role to play, but it seems that Nigerian economic development has not yet been assured. Therefore, this paper attempts an examination of the Christian church as a catalyst to economic development in Nigeria.

Introduction

Two passages in the New Testament give me tremendous amount of joy. First is what Jesus Christ says in John 10:10 "I have come to the world in order that you might have life, and to have it more

abundantly”. The second passage comes from Mark 1:15 “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is among you”. One may wonder what relevance these scriptural passages have for the topic and in the field of economics. Without delving into the exegetical analysis of these important texts, suffice it to be mentioned that they underline the fundamental stance of the church vis-à-vis the world, the society and mankind in general. According to Anozie (2007:1),

a church is a group of people or persons called out or set apart, sanctified or redeemed from the shackles and sorrows of this evil world to serve God’s purpose in any human society like ours with exemplary life worthy of the divine calling, in honest manifestation of other virtues like humility, patience, meekness, forgiveness, tolerance, unity, love, faithfulness, justice and truthfulness.

It is both a theological travesty and also a human anachronism to see the church as a withdrawn community, unconcerned with the privations and problems of the contemporary society. Thus Ajayi (1965:15) asserted that “social reform is implicit in the preaching of a new religion”. Undoubtedly, certain elements within the church circles underplay the positive contributions of the church towards the economic development of nations. Such groups of people have encouraged the wrong notion that the church and the kingdom of God are synonymous with poverty, want and need, if you can excuse a conical play-on-words. Can a kingdom succeed in poverty? If Jesus talked about the kingdom and talked about abundant life, it follows that the movement of which he was the originator must champion the crusade for economic development and social change.

Whatever may be the historians’ *raison detre* with reference to the reformation; it is an incontrovertible fact that without the economic and social deprivations of the German populace, Martin Luther’s appeal probably could not have stirred the German people. Of particular importance was his appeal to the German common people and the consequent peasant revolt. Germany was in need of economic

change and they saw in Luther the one means of developing their economy and improving the social lot. This illustration tries to sensitize us to the particular stance of Christ that his mission was to improve the lot of men.

Concept of economic development

In development economics, the term economic development is commonly used. According to Falodun and Nnadi (2007:32)

Economic development is the process by which there is a long period of sustained growth in the per capital real income of a country, accompanied by fundamental changes in the structure of the economy and an overall sustained improvement in the material well-being of the people.

They maintained that economic development occurs if the rate of growth of real per capital income in the country is higher than the rate of growth of population, over a long period of time. It means an expansion of health and educational services and more persons having access to them. Economic development is followed by an increase in life expectancy and standard of living. Similarly Oguji and Kene (2009:19) asserted that “economic development is the process of growth in total and per capita income accompanied by fundamental changes in the economy”.

Economic development is relevant to underdeveloped countries, because these backward countries are concerned with how to develop and use their unknown and unused resources. It requires some sort of planning and guidance to keep the forces of expansion in a particular direction, for example, to increase life expectancy, there will be a need to consciously plan and direct resources in the area of health services etc (Inwelegbu, 2011).

Qualitative change is the heartbeat of economic development. It is only when there is an increase in the quality of life (e.g. a higher than average life expectancy), food output (e.g. more protein rather than

carbohydrates) and real income (increase in purchasing power of money) and so on, that we can say that economic development has taken place. In fact, economic development always produces economic growth.

Present Nigerian economic system

Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960 and became a republic in 1963. Nigeria adopted the economic system namely mixed economy of Britain, her colonial master. Thus, Nigeria, on her own, did not choose the form of economic system that was based on the characteristics behaviour of Nigerians. However, as a developing country that had been for long ruled by the colonial masters, Nigeria had no option at independence than to dance according to her masters. The independence was purely political independence and not economic independence. Consequently, the economy was still tied to apron of the colonial masters, who continued to influence the level of growth of the various economic sectors of the economy.

Hence, the adoption of mixed economy as the economic system of Nigeria was influenced by the following factors according to Oguji (2013)

- i. Mixed economic system was the system of Britain, the country that colonized and influenced the economic policies of Nigeria for decades.
- ii. The private sector had to take up the responsibility of providing both the social and economic infrastructure necessary for the development of the country's economy.
- iii. There was the felt need to encourage private participation in the production of goods and services which are purely private goods.
- iv. There was problem of the provision of some social and economic infrastructure as well as public goods which the private sector may not be able to provide equitably because of

huge financial involvement or because they are not profitable to the private sector.

- v. The pre-colonial Nigeria was characterized by highly independence economic structure of the private sector. In some regions of Nigeria, there were strong political centres with recognized political leaders, Chiefs, Obas, Emirs who were controlling economic activities. These structures paved way for some degree of private ownership of some means of production such as land, which was being allocated to individual as demand (subsistence) arose. This practice which continues up to date makes complete takeover of means of production by government difficult, if not impossible.
- vi. The pre-colonial social structure of Nigeria though diverse had a common feature of family ties. There was the extended family system which provided a kind of social security. The ultimate aim of the system was to help the members of the family to be able to cater for themselves and to cater for those who were permanently or temporarily helpless such as the old, the sick and the unemployed. This system supported private participation in the provision of welfare services to the people.
- vii. As a developing country, the best option for Nigeria was to combine the good aspect of capitalism with the good aspects of socialism to facilitate rapid economic growth and development. This encourages some degree of planning and accommodates market forces.

The effects of mixed economy on Nigeria economic development are:

1. Slow rate of development of the private sector of the economy. Some economic development projects are exclusively provided by the government. The private sector can only provide if granted licence by the government. These areas exclude electricity.

2. Provision of social and economic infrastructure was faster and at lower prices e.g. water, electricity, education, health. They would cost higher for consumers if they were provided by the private sector.
3. Government monopoly in provision of some amenities breeds corruption and inefficiency – Most of the government parastatals and corporations were very inefficient. Taps are dry, electricity is epileptic, health centres lack drugs, and schools are not equipped.
4. Greater independence on government by people for provision of amenities. The citizens rely very heavily on the government for provision of all welfare facilities. Hence there is very few self-help development projects embarked upon by the people.
5. Creation of conducive environment for private sector takes off. The government sets in motion the machinery that facilitated take off of the private sector though the provision of social and economic infrastructure without which meaningful economic activities cannot be carried out. The capital involved would make it difficult for the private sector to provide these facilities.

The Church and economic development: the Sierra Leone Experience

It is just by the finger of God that Sierra Leone became the first Christian community in Africa to receive the gospel and for the church; this opportunity was seen as God sent. Therefore when the 18th century explorers invaded Africa, the church in Europe saw this, in the language of a great missionary, as “God-intoxicated opportunism”. Traders, philanthropists, politicians, humanitarians and church men went into co-operative endeavours to improve the conditions of men. This association of people with altruistic, materialistic and religious motivations was to transform for better and

for worse the history of the peoples of Nigeria. I don't intend to dwell on why Britain and some of the European powers suddenly turned their attention from American concomitant with the expected gains.

Already in Sierra Leone, the church had witnessed the success of making non elite who have religious commitment with economic enterprise. By 1787 a new settlement of Africans arrived in Freetown with the manifesto of not only avoiding the evils of a monetary economy but also to establish a medium of exchange based on individual labour with a special tax on those too proud or idle to work. According to Okeke (2006:48)

They arrived as a Christian community and were able to establish various schools for teaching craft and to produce artisans. By 1807 the settlers had begun with words of Christopher Fyfe developing into a coherent self-reliant community. As the community expanded, parishes were defined and each was headed by a mission agent who becomes not only a political overseer but also the operational head of the economic experiments. This was Charles MacCarcry's brainchild.

Of particular interest to us is the fact that these parishes/areas were defined and created to accommodate people of one ethnic group at a time. Recognized villages such as Regent, Wilberforce, Waterloo Gabba-town, Fulah, Mac Carthain or Fztu of villages along ethnic lines contributed more than any other single factor in the successful launching of the parish system.

Ethnic associations guaranteed continuity of old values as well as providing a basic from which new adjustments to social and economic changes were attempted. They formed societies known small companies or big companies by which new comers were absorbed easily within their groups. An example of ethnic persistence and success was that exemplified in the life of William Henry Pratt, an Igbo representative who struggled against all odds to create an

enviable name for himself and his Igbo compatriots. Like his other representatives, he was attached to his church and his community and became the President of Igbo association in Freetown and the committee that found mission in Igbo community.

These men – Yoruba, Igbo, Nupe, Hausa, Ijaw had the vision of home. Home meant for them something to be remembered; family homestead, father, mother. Thus Ajayi (1965:43) reiterated that

it was this instruct that led to the return of the Christians to their homeland and the founding of the Yoruba for Africa Mission in 1842. The Methodist Society for Africa Mission in 1867 acted first followed by the CMS in 1843. Presbyterians in 1843 at Calabar baptized in 1850.

They began organized farming and introduced new crops hitherto unknown in this part of the world and with their educational classes introduced the art of printing. What the church did was to keep these emigrants together in a few local centres, and gave them scope and encouragement. They offered them common opportunity, employment as catechists, evangelists and school master, opportunists to build houses, roads and other faculty to practice their art. It was the emigrants that linked Nigeria intimately with the European masters.

Christian church and economic development in Nigeria: today and presently

Days are gone when the issue of economic development lies with the government and other private sectors, even individuals. The Christian church is still facing the situation of Nigeria economy where poverty, inflation, unemployment, economic instability, etc. are the order of the day and have greater role or influence on the country's rate of economic progress. Most churches employ at least one person, and many have upwards of 20 employees, especially if they operate a childcare facility or school. Since churches generally operate

facilities, churches are consumers of energy to heat and cool the often large open spaces.

The Christian church has provided both moral and economic impetus for the country's economic development. Here, the church inculcates morals. If morality will be imbibed by the citizens, it will go a long way to curtailing social vices associated with erring economy like bribery, embezzlement, corruption. There will be judicious spending organizations' money and other vices like kidnapping and tensions under which smooth economy cannot germinate will stop, or be minimized.

Gruber (2005), on the role of the church and economic development posits that the church needs to concentrate on the business of creating economic institutions. The church has to find itself in a situation where it is the best, continuing as an organized entity in the local community for the acquisition and development of land, the building of business enterprises and the employment of people.

Presently, virtually all the churches in Nigeria are involved in one economic advancement or the other. The Anglican Communion, Diocese on the Niger, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha, to mention but a few have projects that include building of affordable homes, guest houses, recreational facilities, clinics and hospitals and other commercial complexes. These developmental strides could transform the people of the locality and society at large. It is in agreement to this kind of actions that Gruber (2005) maintains that when such developments take place in low-income areas, the increase property values attract new residents and become magnets for diverse businesses and better-paying jobs.

It is obvious that church-based business enterprises help rebuild a community's social infrastructure and provide much needed value-based services as childcare, youth development, elder care and substance counselling. These activities tend to lead to improved schools, better public safety and an enhanced quality of life. From

this, economic development occurs; every one living in the area and those in surrounding communities benefits.

The significant role of the church in the development of agriculture could never be over emphasized. Thus, speaking on the role of agriculture to the economic development, Onuora (2012:15) asserts that:

Agriculture has gone a long way to produce food for man and animals in Nigeria. And the church has given its supports for the benefit of its members and the country at large. Consequently it is the source of raw materials for the domestic industries and for export. Above all, agriculture has paved way for entrepreneurs to come invoke. Owing to this fact, it is important for the church to always teach “all hands on the plough” for economic development.

It is noteworthy that Christian churches participate in industrial establishment. For more rapid development of industries, not only do government participate actively in industrial establishment, today also, churches do, by establishing or setting up industries or by buying shares thereby contributing to raising required fund for the industries.

In the area of banking, the church is contributing immensely towards economic development. Many churches today establish a Community Bank, for example the Diocese on the Niger Anglican Communion established Aku Chukwu Micro Finance Bank at All Saints Cathedral Onitsha, and other churches within their locality in order to encourage saving of funds which would be invested in business ventures, to provide the needed capital for development, to promote trading activities, and providing short and long term loans to individuals and firms.

Doctors, nurses, teachers, bankers and other categories of workers who work in schools, hospitals, banks and other establishments owned by the church, are paid salaries; through this means, they earn their

living. This has gone a long way to reduce the problem of unemployment, because churches create employment opportunities. Additionally, these workers pay taxes used by government to develop many sectors of the economy in a country. By doing so (paying of taxes), they are contributing their quota towards national and economic development. Suffice to say, many individuals through word of God get visions on how to produce one commodity or the other, which are eventually brought to the market for people to buy and sale and make profit from thereby earning a living. Indeed Christian church has been and is still contributing to every strata of the country's development.

Hindrances to the role of the Church towards economic development in Nigeria

In the efforts of the church towards economic development, there are a lot of challenges. According to the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), the Nigerian economy is currently passing through growth challenges not previously anticipated by policy makers. Sanusi (2013) disclosed that the committee traced the growth challenges to the decline in the contribution of oil sector which he said became apparent in the last half of 2013. Also, he stressed the decline in the contribution of agriculture sector to growth since the third quarter of 2011, in spite of investment in agricultural transformation initiatives of the federal government.

It is clear that any developing economies have not reach mass consumption stage of growth and as such another problem or hindrances to the economic development of Nigeria is poor economic policies to control inflation and unemployment.

Also jeopardizing the country's economic development is the poor educational systems. This is practically seen in much emphasis given to theory than practical lesson that could help to cause development. For example most Nigerian engineers have more theoretical knowledge of handling construction work and mechanics, because the system of education trains them to be job seekers and not job makers

that would help to create more employment for the people so as make them acquire the basic needs of lives.

Another hindrance to economic growth in Nigeria is the poor political climate. This factor has kept the country in problem such as low production, high inflation rates, unemployment and poverty. This is because most of the government officials are corrupt and the prior existence of coups and civil wars leaves the country in poor stage of economic growth and development.

Other problems include: poverty, unemployment, poor technology/production methods used, high illiteracy rates, high population growth rates, thus increasing the dependency rates within families, damping by the developed economies which kills the initiative to develop and expand local industries, high rates of profit repatriation by foreign investors within the developing economies, dependency on the developed world, high level of deficit managing which worsen their salaries of payment position, and poor terms of trade in the world market.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made as a way of having viable economic development.

1. Government has a role to play in the economic policy making of the country to ensure that no policy will be to the detriment of the country at large, for example, setting up a committee that will see to the implementation of any economic policy. This will go a long way to ensure that there will be no abandon economic project in the country.
2. Education of the country should be based on the needs of Nigerian country and practical should be taken seriously, thus students tend to remember more of what they practicalize than what they read. Economics education should be promoted to enhance students' knowledge in economic development of the

country, and how they will contribute their quota to the development of the country at large.

3. Youth development and empowerment programme should be adhered to, because the youths are the future hope of the country. Youth programme will enhance deep influence on the youth, for them to be economically balanced.
4. Entrepreneurship education should be encouraged by the government and made a compulsory general course in Nigeria higher institutions.
5. Federal Government should give loan to churches that have set up institutions like schools, hospitals in order to enhance successful running of the institution for economic development.

Conclusion

In the foregoing attempt had been made to examine the contribution of Christian church towards the economic development of Nigeria. The church had been at the centre and concern with the privations and problems of the contemporary society. If Jesus talked about the kingdom and talked about abundant life, it follows that the movement of which he was the originator must champion the crusade for economic development and social change.

The church restored the comprehensive education in order to get quick money. This they used to train their members and build various communities. The projects and establishments carried by church in the various locations and locality add taste to the area and is a source of economic growth and development.

Indeed while it is true that churchmen and the church were not professors in economics, yet they applied practical economic system which had contributed immensely to the development of this great country.

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