

EMPOWERING RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS THROUGH THE BASIC CHRISTIAN FARMING SYSTEMS APPROACH AS DEVELOPMENT CATALYSTS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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(Received 3 December, 2004; Revision accepted 8 April, 2005)

ABSTRACT

Two approaches to development, the Farming systems approach and the Basic Christian Community approach are examined in terms of success rates. Both approaches record a partial success due to one – sided emphasis on development: The farming systems approach which enjoys financial support from funding agencies emphasizes only material accumulation whereas the Basic Christian Community approach, which has an ethic and vision, lacks support from these agencies. In order to redress the situation and reap the full benefit of development, a merger approach, the Basic Christian Farming Systems approach, is suggested. This approach advocates greater empowerment of the rural religious institutions through support from funding agencies, thereby equipping these institutions for their social roles as mediating institutions and development catalysts.

KEYWORDS: Farming systems, Basic Christian Community, mediating institution, Basic Christian farming systems, Religious institution

INTRODUCTION

Development theories over the last five decades have shifted strategies from one developmental model to another in search of the "ideal" in terms of maximum productivity. Emphases have constantly shifted from modernization theory to the technical assistance model and presently to the sustainable development model with due attention to the merits and demerits of each. Commenting some three decades ago on the developmental nightmare faced by the people of the world's hinterland, Guy Gran, a renowned international development consultant, remarked that for most of the Third World, development has remained more a dream than a reality. According to Gran (1983:1), "... Indeed more than thirty years of rhetoric and money-pushing have diminished expectations and left more than a billion people still deprived of most basic human needs."

Clearly exposing what he saw as the principal problems of human development, which include large concentrations of power, the ideologies of economic doctrines they proclaim and the process of exclusion they practice, Gran (1983) advocated a paradigm shift in search for alternatives in order to advance human welfare.

With the enormous amount of literature in the area of development, one wonders why, in practical terms, development has remained a dream for most countries of the Third World. If the above assessment is correct, it can be submitted that the problem is not in the paucity of development agencies but rather in the wrong notion of the concept of development, or in the pursuit of counterproductive development models.

This paper examines the problem of underdevelopment in rural communities and, conceptualizing religion as an indispensable instrument, proposes institutional empowerment as a necessary strategy for effective service delivery. In other words, the paper argues that in matters of rural and community development, the religious institutions i.e., those formally established religious bodies that maintain positive relationships with the social environment, should be considered indispensable stake-holders and empowered accordingly to shoulder the challenge.

Such institutions, as opposed to sects or cults, include those religious bodies (for example, the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist Churches) which endorse existing political

economic and social arrangements and are in turn recognized by the state because of their capacity to contribute to meaningful social progress. They differ radically from sects and cults because of their interest and involvement in social welfare. They are, unlike sects, considered "life – encompassing" organizations (Swatos, 1975). As formally established corporate units, centred around a sacramentally based system of offices and their occupants, they possess a sociological nature that is clearly distinction and visible (Valliar, 1970).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The problems of Third World nations and others that share similar defining characteristics are, in fact, many and multi-faceted. These problems, among others, include military upheavals, food shortages and starvation, malnutrition, high mortality and fertility rates, population explosion, poor health care delivery, low literacy rates, and lately in Nigeria, a proliferation of ethnic and interethnic rivalries. These problems in varying degrees can be linked to a common origin – the adoption of poor models of development. While these problems may not be completely absent in even the developed nations of the world, their magnitude in the Third World is such that in order to prevent their increasing devastating escalation, more than average of the nation's gross domestic product has to be spent. This situation has helped to widen the gap between the industrial West and the near stagnation of the Third World in matters of development.

One aspect of the paradigm shift advocated by development agents has emphasized the need for the poor to participate effectively in political and economic terms in decisions that affect their life and general welfare.

Citing as evidence of developmental futility in countries like Zaire, Indonesia and Thailand, Gran advises accordingly that Third World development must be participatory and bottom-up (Gran 1983:2). Writing about the same period, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian social critic and educator, assessed the situation in his native South America and concluded that if meaningful development had to be achieved, the poor must participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation (Freire, 1984:32). From these advocacies it would follow that the root cause of development failures in rural communities lies in the exclusion of the rural

people in the important aspects of in-put and decision – making.

Consistent with the above analysis, it is here suggested that, along with the participatory and bottom-up approaches advocated by these development consultants, the role of religious institutions as grassroots institutions must be strengthened if optimum success is to be recorded.

In other words, the religious institutions in rural communities need to be brought into the picture and empowered financially and morally to supplement the efforts of the agents of development whether local or foreign – based. In

line with the foregoing advocacy, it is here argued that one of the two models currently advocated in community development literature, the Basic Christian Community approach, could be re-inforced methodologically in order to yield greater dividend.

THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION AS DEVELOPMENT CATALYST

The idea of the religious institution as development catalyst derives from the concept of the Basic Christian Community (BCC). The BCC approach promotes development by building on the religious community as a mediating institution in the community. According to the notion of mediating institutions developed by Berger and Neuhaus (1981), such institutions stand between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life. They bridge the gap between the individual and the public sphere. Without such mediation, the individual faces a double crisis, the crisis of struggling with the balancing act between the demands of the two spheres, and also political crisis because the megastructures (notably the donor agencies) come to be devoid of personal meaning and are therefore viewed as unreal or even malignant.

Since individuals need certain structural supports for personal growth and social maturity, the religious institution uniquely fulfils this need, because it has a private and human face, transmitting meaning and values to the megastructures.

This makes the religious institution an appropriate organ or instrument for humane and orderly social change because it would provide the individual with the necessary mechanism – moral instruction, ethical control and socialization, etc – for crisis management which is what development is all about (Umoh, 1996). As Berger and Neuhaus (1981:6) further suggest, mediating institutions are essential not only for development but for a vital democratic society. How the religious institution functions in a developmental capacity is a matter of appropriate methodology.

The developmental interest of the orthodox Christian churches can be fully defended in part when one considers the economic efforts of the early missionaries in Nigeria in such places like Onitsha towards the end of the 19th century. Apart from the building of schools, they set themselves the task of providing medicine and ensuring the provision of other material needs for the people (Essien, 1999). Today, considering the situation in Nigeria, her economic, political and cultural needs, such economic roles have been successfully undertaken by the New Religious Movements (NRM), i.e., those Christian churches or religious groups that are either founded by Nigerians or have originated from the traditional Euro - American mission churches (Udoette, 1997). Typically characteristic of the NRM's is their interest in the economic wellbeing of the people they evangelize and their familiarity with the local ethnic, economic and liturgical landscapes of the communities (Udoette, 2002). Both Udoette (2002) and Essien (1997) have testified to the success of these NRM'S because they have inserted the provision of education and other material needs within the ambient of the Gospel. Essien (1997) has also recorded the economic impact of the good news community, a typical NRM among the people of Abak in Akwa Ibom State.

EXAMINING TWO CURRENT APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT

i) The Farming Systems (FS) Approach.

It is the consensus of Social scientists that a logically consistent theory should easily translate into practice in order not to reduce everything to philosophical speculation. Accordingly, development agents have always tried to bring their theoretical standpoints to bear on the practical lives of the people, who constitute the goals of all theoretical endeavours.

In line with the above logic, development agents evolved, in the 1960's, a developmental approach, which they referred to as the Farming Systems (FS) approach to development. The model has been widely used by both national and international donor agencies as a theoretical framework for development in various parts of the Third World. The World Bank projects in Indonesia and Thailand in the 1960's and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) maize project in Zaire in the 1970's (Gran, 1983: 59 – 83) are but two of such instances.

What is distinctive about the FS approach is that projects are designed primarily for the increased production of material goods. Essentially, projects, which are sponsored by donor agencies, consist of the complex arrangement of soils, water resources, crops, livestock, labour and other resources and characteristics within an environmental setting that the rural family manages in accordance with its preferences, capabilities and available resources (Shaner, 1982:3):

Since the FS approach is basically an approach in agricultural research and development programmes geared toward increasing productivity, its objective centers primarily on material accumulation and because it is largely economically oriented, it attracts the support of governments and other international agencies for financial, technical, capital and other human resources.

For example, at the G8 summit (meeting of member Nations of African creditors) in Genoa in 2002, members were charged with working out programmes flowing out of the NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development) to ensure that each member country of the summit would support a project in Africa, toward the realization of one of NEPAD's major objectives – the eradication of poverty in Africa (Omoweh, in SSAN: 2003, p. 33). This new framework of interaction with the rest of the world is premised on the belief that the poor African countries would derive potential economic benefits from the multi-lateral financial institutions of the developed countries, including the G8. Such is a purely farming systems approach as popularised in agricultural development.

A more balanced strategy, instead, would emphasize the participatory process in development, involving people and not the exclusive projects of the policy makers since development must induce empowerment and self-reliance. This materialist orientation is generally the major thrust of donor agencies. For example, according to the World Bank, rural development is primarily an economic issue meant to raise the low levels of rural income through agricultural modernization (World Bank, 1975).

As a developmental orientation however, the FS approach can only be effective if it overcomes its major weakness, i.e. economic concentration at the expense of the human factor. Essentially, the FS approach promotes a philosophy of development, which reduces the worth of the human person.

ii) The Basic Christian Community Approach (BCC)

In contrast to the FS, the BCC approach which also has been experimented upon in various parts of the developing world with varying degrees of success, focuses on the individual. It has been applied in Latin and South America, parts of Asia and the Philippines (Claver, 1978: 126). According to Claver, it is a grassroots strategy with emphasis on empowerment and development with a human face. Unlike

the farming systems approach, it takes into consideration basic human values and worth and their right to participate in the decisions that touch their very being and welfare.

The Basic Christian Community (BCC) approach differs radically from the FS and other strategies because it has a vision and an ethic both of which are essential components of development.

But, unfortunately, the only sources for support and funding for the Basic Christian Community approach are non-governmental agencies, like the church and voluntary organizations. It is an approach that measures the success of development not in terms of material and capital accumulations only but also in terms of the individual who is also given the opportunity to grow and to be creative. The

Basic Christian Community approach sees development as a people's total responsibility to struggle for themselves. In the words of Gran (1983) and Freire (1984) development is freedom to create and to construct, to wander and to venture. Today, it is becoming increasingly necessary to distinguish between economic growth and genuine development, which centers on the human person. In its ideal form the BCC approach to development is a process that creates economic citizens, i.e., people who are able and willing to enhance their own livelihood by controlling the basic decisions that affect their lives. This strategy unlike the FS places equal emphasis on investments as well as on participation and self-reliance which can directly affect the wellbeing of the masses of poor people of the rural communities by making them more productive and including them as active participants in decision-making in the development process. Because of such potentials, the BCC remains a viable option for rural development if given the proper financial and political empowerment by funding institutions. Merging the merits of the Farming systems with those of the Basic Christian Community approach can be a useful developmental venture if properly handled.

This merger is seen as necessary and capable of reducing the weaknesses inherent in other development approaches taken singly. For instance, Modernization which stresses the process of social change through industrialization overlooks a people's traditional cultural patterns (MacLison, 1996) while the basic needs approach of the 1970's simply portrays the rural people as poor helpless subjects who qualify only for economic receivership. On the other hand, the human resources and sustainable development approaches of the 1980's and 1990's despite their good intentions of attempting to integrate the people into the development process confront a major handicap, i.e., insufficient funding born out of fear of bureaucratic bottlenecks, corruption and mismanagement. That was the fate which befell the defunct Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB), now renamed Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), soon after its creation in 1960 (Ekpenyong, 2001).

PROMOTING RURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE BASIC CHRISTIAN FARMING SYSTEMS (BCFS) APPROACH

Two different orientations to development have been examined above, each with an inherent weakness. The Farming Systems approach much like the developmental approaches of the past fifty years has been shown to emphasize only the material aspects of development at the detriment of the personality and cultural factors while the Basic Christian Community approach which is conscious of the need for community participation and self-reliance risks insufficient support from funding agencies. For a more balanced approach to development, the Basic Christian Farming Systems approach is proposed. This merger demands a combination of the positive aspects of both strategies by calling for a greater empowerment of the rural religious institutions by donor agencies. This strategy ensures that each approach supplies the defects of the other.

As further suggested by Gran, one way to curb the evils of capital-based development – the arms race, the cold war, global poverty and inequality, monopoly capitalism, totalitarianism, global bureaucratization, the commodification of life, ecological destruction, and overpopulation, etc. – is to democratize power concentration through grassroots empowerment.

Additionally, the involvement of the religious group as a moral community is capable of reducing to a reasonable level the incidence of corruption and mismanagement that accompany most phases of projects that fail. Over the years, religious leaders working in partnership with members of their congregations have been seen to achieve reasonable measures of success in projects cited in their local communities. Such efforts, when prudently handled, have led to the construction of hospitals, schools and other social amenities that serve the interest of the local residents, as the case of the Good News community in Abak in Akwa Ibom State clearly demonstrates. According to Abue (2004), church – based organizations by using spiritual values do have potentials to become vehicles of transformation when they work under well – understood arrangements of partnership with local people, promoting the adoption and diffusion of innovations. Such involvement of a rural – based institution further serves the needed role of mediation between the big financial donor agents and the local beneficiaries, thereby curbing alienation on the part of the beneficiaries. This strategy enhances more personal involvement and self-reliance (Schumacher, 1973).

Although the literature suggests contrasting views on the role of the religious institution in social life, the functional perspective suggests that the integration into the social system can be caused by alienation resulting from the economic and political magastuctures of the society. (Berger and Neuhaus, 1981). Therefore, in order for transformative action to occur and for development to achieve a lasting impact there has to be a combination of a sense of control and personal power made possible by a mediating structure, like the religious institution (Berger and Neuhaus, 1981).

METHODOLOGY

Obviously, an important question here as noted above is the issue of methodology. How can this approach be practically implemented? The philosophy behind the Basic Christian Community approach (BCC), is to empower the people at the grassroots. The BCC emphasizes that the rural religious institution show commitment to, and respect for, ordinary people in their host communities in matters of development by respecting their plans and the control of their own groups. It rejects any attempt to dictate for them from the top. Methodologically, certain criteria and guidelines are constructed using the religious institution as a development agent, and once the development agent is in the ball-park, the benefitting community members are the ones who set the agenda.

In order to execute this role the religious institution selects enlightened members of the Christian Community with leadership potentials and entrusts them with the responsibility of organizing the local community members. The role of the community – based leaders consists primarily of gathering information on support for projects. This is done through a survey method, the sample frame of which should be all members of the community or a fair representation of the community. For the purpose of input and area wide coverage, the "citizen developed survey method" is preferred.

The citizen/community developed survey method is a research design that is initiated by the local community members. Its primary purpose is to identify individual and organizational support for projects in order to improve a sense of community. The "interview" instrument is best for the purpose in order to involve the non – enlightened members of

the community. It should be administered by the enlightened members of the community and effort should therefore be made to involve all or most of the community members in view of the stated objective. For reasons of practicality and convenience, the community should be small, numbering about 500 households or, if the community is too large for effective coverage, the sample frame could be restricted to formal community leaders. The content of the interview itself should be determined by the enlightened members of the Christian Community.

In brief, the BCFS scheme is a developmental strategy which uses the citizen – developed community survey technique as a method for data gathering, with the use of the enlightened members of the Christian community as agents.

The above strategy is, of course, not oblivious of the fact that throughout history, religious personalities have been found to be wanting in respect of their moral integrity. To guard against this it is necessary to exercise extreme caution in the

choice of those serving as change agents or facilitators in the business of community development. Furthermore, if the community is complex in nature, adequate sampling technique of the leaders is essential in order to ensure the representation of the diverse interest groups in the community to guard against victimization and discrimination in the distribution of social amenities. What is crucial about the approach is the inclusion of the religious community as a grassroots organization in the important issue of community development.

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