


# Poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic: A challenge to the church

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This article addresses the challenge to the church in the struggle against poverty amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It starts by giving an overview of the enormity of poverty in a post-apartheid South Africa. It also indicates how the pandemic has enlarged the problem to extreme proportions. After looking at poverty through the lens of the Bible, the article attempts to define poverty as different forms of deprivation on the one hand and inequality on the other hand. In South Africa, deprivation and inequality are the two sides of the same coin, which serve as important indicators for the local church in the struggle against poverty. This article thirdly refers to the history of the church to describe how the church, as an agent of change, is called to react to the challenge of poverty. The fourth part of the article introduces the action plan that was developed by the South African Council of Churches through Local Ecumenical Action Networks. This serves as an example of how different churches can work together in communities in the struggle against poverty in a holistic way. The article concludes with the emphasis that the struggle against poverty in South Africa is an ongoing struggle that has been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Contribution:** This article examines the devastating effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has on communities in South Africa with specific reference to poverty. The focus is on how the church as agent of change is in the perfect position to rise to this challenge to make a difference by means of Local Ecumenical Area Networks.

**Keywords:** poverty; COVID-19 pandemic; church; biblical; theology; post-apartheid.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought South Africa to the brink of the proverbial poverty abyss. In a country where nearly 18% of the population was living under the so-called poverty line before the pandemic (World Bank 2019), the extent of the poverty crisis is a nightmarish reality. According to Cilliers (2007:3), poverty was already identified as one of the so-called 'seven giants' who posed a serious threat to society by the South African Church leaders conference that convened in Pretoria in 2003. A year later Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane identified the challenge poverty posed to South Africa as follows (Statistics South Africa 2017):

While there have been many changes with regard to policy and practice, we still have a long and difficult journey ahead of us, especially in the fight against poverty (Ndungane 2004:197). Ndungane is correct when he says that it is poverty which robs South African citizens of their right to live lives of dignity, peace and joy (Ndungane 2004:197). How the problem escalated was confirmed by Statistics South Africa when it was reported that 55.5% of the population of South Africa still lived in poverty in 2015.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the picture dramatically. The pandemic, which arrived on South African shores in late March 2020, prompted a national lockdown in April 2020 to stem the spread of the virus. This rocked an economy which was already in recession. The COVID-19 pandemic gave momentum to a poverty pandemic.

In April, the International Labour Organization predicted global formal job losses of about 305 m and an estimated loss of 1.6 bn jobs in the informal economy. Former South African Airways board member and former Rothschild & Sons chair Martin Kingston said in May that the economic quandary South Africa was in was so bad that 1 m people could be added to the unemployment line this year (Ramaphosa 2020:1). Servaas Van der Berg quotes Ihsaan Bassier, Joshua Budlender, Murray Leibbrandt, Rocco Zizzamia and Vimal Ranchhod who indicated that a reduction of three-quarters of all informal income because of the lockdown would, on its own, increase extreme poverty, defined as an income of less than about R7000 per person per year, from around 14% of

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**Note:** Special Collection entitled COVID-19 from a Theological Perspective, sub-edited by Jerry Pillay (UP).

the population to around 21% (Van der Berg 2020:1). According to Simone Schotte (2020:1) of the Chronic Poverty Advisory network, this gives rise to concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic may not only present a temporary shock, but it also has lasting implications for poverty rates in South Africa through its effects on people's health, education and employment prospects, as well potential knock-on effects on rates of crime and domestic abuse'. She further states: 'The pandemic may not only have short-term income effects but also hamper people's income-generating activities in the longer term, as households will turn to liquidating their small savings and selling off productive assets to cope during the lock down period' (Schotte 2020:1). She continues by identifying reduced food consumption in times of hardship, school closures and the constraints that poor children face in online teaching as further important factors that will have long-term negative economic impact (Schotte 2020:1).

The statistics quoted show that the war against poverty is not the responsibility of government alone. This point of view was already put forward at the important Carnegie 3 conference on poverty in South Africa which took place in 2013. In his opening address, the then minister of Finance, Mr Trevor Manuel, referred to the challenges of poverty in society when he said: 'Whilst government should never be allowed to devolve its responsibility', active citizenry can never outsource their responsibility to address poverty to government. The church is one of the instruments through which active citizenry can respond to the war against poverty.

The challenge to act on poverty is fundamentally part of the churches' calling as is being stated in the Belhar confession part 4:

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity he is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that he calls his church to follow him in this; that he brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry ...

This confession came from the heart of the South African society in 1982.<sup>1</sup> To understand this calling, it is important to have an overview of poverty described in the Bible and what is meant by the term poverty.

## Poverty defined

### A biblical perspective

According to Scheffler (2014:1), poverty was also a problem in biblical times. That is why the prophets of the Old Testament as well as Jesus and Paul specifically addressed the issue. It is impossible to discuss poverty described in the Bible in detail within the scope of this article. Scheffler, however, helps us by providing a 'keyhole' perspective on poverty mentioned in the Bible by looking at the various terms used for poverty (Scheffler 2014:1).

1. The Confession of Belhar was adopted by the Dutch Reformed Missions Church after a status confessionis was declared by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches at its meeting in Ottawa, Canada, in 1982.

There are four terms in the Old Testament that are used to describe poverty. They are *ani/anw*, *ebjon*, *dal* and *rasj*. The term *Ani* (Lv 19:10) refers to material poverty, *ebjon* (Job 31:19) to the socially weak and *dal* (Ps 41:1–2) to the helpless and poor, whilst *rasj* (2 Sm 12:3) refers to material poverty. These references to poverty in the Hebrew Bible are according to Scheffler (2014:7) few if compared with other issues. Mainly supportive references are made to the poor and believers are called upon to act on the plight of the poor. In the New Testament, there are also four terms that refer to poverty, namely *ptochos*, *penes*, *endees* and *penichros*. *Ptochos* (Lk 16:20–22) refers to poverty in the literal sense of the word and is usually used to describe the extremely poor and destitute (Louw & Nida 1988:564). *Penes* (2 Cor 9:9) refers to poor person, although his poverty is not so severe as a *ptochos*. *Endees* (Ac 4:34) indicates somebody who needs resources, whilst *penichros* (Lk 21:2) means the same as *ptochos*. Emphasis on poverty in the New Testament finds its origin in the words of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, being poor himself (Lk 9:58), declared the poor blessed (Mt 5:3), preached to them and took care of them. An important indicator for the churches' struggles against poverty is the fact that Jesus also gave his disciples the responsibility to care for the poor (Mk 6:36). This responsibility is also reflected by other New Testament writings.

Scheffler (2014:8) is thus correct when he states that the writing of the synoptic gospels reflects different ways in which Jesus reached out to the poor. It is especially in the gospel of Luke, where caring for the poor is an important theme. According to Scheffler (2014:8), Luke's double volume (Luke – Acts) is the biblical writing that deals most extensively with the issue of poverty, and the aim is always to eradicate extreme poverty. Scheffler (2014:8) concludes: 'Through the study of the Bible, a conscious effort can be made to contribute to the eradication of poverty in South Africa and in the world' and further:

For it is not the Bible as such that will eradicate poverty, nor our 'objective' study of it, but the way we interpret it and are inspired by it to become practically involved in the struggle against poverty.

He then makes the very important remark that reflection on poverty should be performed in such a way that it leads to action.

To define the action that should be taken, it is important to define poverty. From the above overview, the term poor in the Bible has diverse meanings, from the worst kind of suffering to any kind of misery. Sachs (2005:26–36) as quoted by Scheffler (2014:8) therefore distinguishes between three kinds of poverty, namely extreme, moderate and relative poverty. Extreme poverty refers to poverty where people are permanently hungry, deprived of shelter, drinking safe drinking water, sanitation, healthcare and education. Moderate poverty refers to poverty where people are not in danger of dying, but their needs are barely met, and they do not have enough to live a meaningful life. Relative poverty refers to poverty where people lack things that the middle class takes for granted. To understand the challenge poverty poses to the church, it is important to define what is meant by poverty in the current context.

## Definitions of poverty

To define 'poverty' is no easy task. Knight (2017:7) is correct when he says: 'A key challenge is the word poverty itself'. He emphasises that despite research on poverty that stretches over hundreds of years, 'there is little agreement about the definition, measurement, causes and solutions' (Knight 2017:7). Govender refers to the Concise Oxford Dictionary to provide us with a composite definition: 'Poverty is the state of lacking adequate means to live comfortably and the want of things or needs indispensable to life' (Govender et al. 2007:1). Bradshaw defines poverty as: 'in its most general sense the lack of necessities' (Bradshaw 2006:4). He explains further: 'Basic food, shelter, medical care, and safety are generally thought necessary based on shared values of human dignity' (Bradshaw 2006:4). Valentine, in search of a definition, defines the essence of poverty as 'inequality' (Valentine, C. A. as quoted by Bradshaw 2006:4). The most complete definition developed by Peter Townsend, which forms the basis of much poverty research today is as follows:

Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. (As quoted by Knight 2017:7)

Defined as such poverty has two sides. On the one hand, it refers to different forms of deprivation, whilst, on the other hand, it refers to inequality that is concerned with the distribution of well-being within a population group.

In South Africa, these two sides of the definition of poverty combine as two sides of the same coin. Poverty means deprivation on the one side and inequality on the other side. This is also in line with the biblical understanding of poverty that gives direction to the calling of the church in the struggle against poverty during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the previous presidents of South Africa, Mr Thabo Mbeki, also emphasised in 2004 the importance of defining poverty in terms of the South African context. He stressed that widespread poverty that is endemic to South Africa will have a huge influence on the future of South Africa. In South Africa, poverty has a direct link to low levels of human dignity and social justice.

That means that poverty has an important social component with in the South African context. The way in which the church gets involved in the struggle against poverty has an influence not only on the life of individuals, but also on the life of specific communities (Southern Africa Trust 2007:4). From the above understanding of poverty, UNICEF gives practical indicators that can guide us on the road in the struggle against poverty by bringing change to communities. The first important step to be taken is *Basic education*. 'Basic education, particularly of girls, is unquestionably a key to reducing poverty'. UNICEF (2000) continues:

An educated girl tends to marry later, is more likely to space her pregnancies, will seek medical care for her child and herself when needed, will give better childcare and nutrition and will ensure that her children attend primary school – all important factors in preventing the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Education is also likely to enhance her income-generating capacity and will embolden her to claim her rights and those of her children. (p. 10)

The second step is *Health and nutrition*. UNICEF (2000) states:

The coverage of immunization, use of oral rehydration in the treatment of diarrhoea, iodization of salt, supplementation and fortification of vitamin A and the promotion of breastfeeding have all given a boost to child survival. (p. 11)

The third step is to provide *Water and sanitation*.

Lack of access to safe drinking water or inadequate hygiene and sanitation causes over 3 million child deaths a year in developing countries – about one in every four such deaths. Moreover, fetching water is a time-consuming activity that is shouldered almost exclusively by women and children. (p. 11)

Improving water and sanitation will change societies. The fourth step is the eradication of *Child labour*. Whilst this is not an automatic development (UNICEF 2000):

[I]t certainly provides a fertile ground for the economic exploitation of children. When a child's primary caretakers cannot make ends meet, it becomes significantly more likely that the child will be pressured to work from an early age to supplement the family's income. (p. 11)

A fourth step that is identified is *Gender*. The importance of focusing on gender is described as follows (UNICEF 2000):

Gender relations often restrict the role of women within the household, community and society at large. This influences their economic status, the selection of national and local development priorities, the design of government policies and programmes and the level of economic growth. (p. 12)

These steps relate to the words of Mr Nelson Mandela in his speech on behalf of the *Make Poverty History* campaign in London in February 2003. Mandela said: 'Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the action of human beings' (Murdoch 2005:2). The church in South Africa is in an ideal position to take up this challenge.

## The church as an agent of change

The response of the church to the challenge of poverty is determined by our understanding of what the church is. The word 'church' in the New Testament comes from the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means the *called out ones* (Emedi 2010:17). Emedi (2010:17) emphasises that the church is viewed as a people called out to belong to the Lord. This definition of church is confirmed by the Belgic Confession (2020) in article 27 which reads as follows:

We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian

believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit. (p. 7)

When attempting to understand what the church is, it is also important not to lose sight of what the church is 'called' to do. According to Emedi (2010), the church is doubly called. He states correctly that:

[T]he church is 'called out' of the world in to becoming church in order to be 'called out' of the church into the world where the purpose of its calling is found. (p. 17)

This point of view is confirmed by Gelder (2004:87) when explaining the double calling as a double movement of being 'called and sent'. Karl Barth identified this action of God as the *missio Dei* (Hancke 2006:38). By this, he meant that church's reaching out to the world in its suffering is not in the first place an action of the church but an attribute of the sovereign God who uses his church as an instrument in the world.

Jurgen Moltmann, one of the greatest theologians of our time, helps us according to Naude (2006:949) to understand the being and calling of the church with his Trinitarian foundation of the church. According to Moltmann, the church is the church of Jesus Christ (Christology), it is also the church of the kingdom of God (theology) and it is the church in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology). The church of the exodus founded on the resurrection carries hope in the world and opens the vista of a new future when it is the church of the cross who lives in the power of the Holy Spirit (Naude 2006:950). This means that faith in the Trinitarian God is the foundation of our belief in the church whose mission is nothing else than *mission Dei*, the embodiment of the crucified God amidst the suffering of history. According to Moltmann:

[I]n the vicious circle of poverty it can be said: God is not dead. He is bread. In the vicious circle of force God's presence is experienced as liberation for human dignity and responsibility. In the vicious circle of alienation his presence is perceived in the experience of human identity and recognition. (Naude 2006:950)

The church living in the power of the spirit is 'a communal church among people ... Missionary churches, confessing churches and churches under the cross are fellowship churches, or inescapable become so. They do not stray into social isolation but become a living hope amid the people' (Moltmann as quoted by Naude 2006:949). If this is our understanding of the church, the church can be nothing else than an agent of change.

According to Pillay, the church adhered to this calling through the centuries of history when he says that emphasis on the church as an agent of transformation and change is not a new concept or understanding of the role of the church (Pillay 2017:1). Pillay continues by saying that the New Testament sees the ministry of mercy not only as an individual obligation, but also as a corporate endeavour of the church, to be carried out by the church itself (Pillay 2017:2). In the time of the Reformation, for example, Calvin

saw poverty as a very serious problem and that it was part of the responsibility of Christians to address the problem. Pillay (2017) then emphasises that:

[T]he Reformation movement did not only renew and change the church leaving the world uninvolved. This movement intervened dramatically in the lives of all and brought about radical changes in the social, political and economic aspects of a new developing world. It gave rise to a new epoch in the history of humankind. (p. 9)

The history of South Africa serves as an excellent modern-day example of how the church played a role as an agent of change in the society.<sup>2</sup> The church played a leading role in the struggle against apartheid. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it as follows: 'The struggle of the church in South Africa was fundamentally how to bring about a more just society where differences of race, colour and culture were seen to be irrelevant and without theological significance' (De Gruchy 2004:ix). Pillay confirms this when he writes that living under apartheid challenged the church to fight for most of the people of South Africa who were poor and oppressed. The church was challenged, by living the gospel, to attempt to transform society and to improve the quality of life of the poor and oppressed (Pillay 2017:12). This happened through the leadership of church leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Rev. Frank Chicane, Dr Beyers Naude and Dr Alan Boesak, to name just a few. Important documents such as the *Message to the People of South Africa* (1968), the *Confession of Belhar* (1982) and the *Kairos* document originated from churches and played a major role, whilst the South African Council of Churches (SACC) took the struggle to the international stage (Pillay 2017:12).

Pillay makes an important remark when he says that the Christian church has 'always been involved in the transformation of society, especially as it took sides with the poor and oppressed' (Pillay 2017:11). He continues by stating that today, with the rise in poverty, violence and injustice, the Christian church is called upon to 'embrace engage and continue with its task of being an agent of transformation and change' (Pillay 2017:11). This statement is powerfully emphasised by Rev. Frank Chicane as quoted by De Gruchy (2004:220) when he said: 'Even if we eventually have a legitimate system in South Africa the struggle for the ideals of the reign of God will not stop'.

The appointment of the SACC President, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana as the chair of the ministerial advisory committee on social behavioural change, is an important indication that the South African government realises the important role that the church can play in fighting the pandemic and its consequences. It is confirmed by Mpumlwana himself when he stated:

We wanted to make sure that every place of worship is a megaphone for the message, so that the health protocols are

2. It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the role of the church in detail. A more detailed account can be found in the ground-breaking book by John de Gruchy with his son Steve de Gruchy: *The Church struggle in South Africa 25 Anniversary edition* published in 2004 by SCM press.

observed, and that people change their social behaviour accordingly. (De Villiers 2020:1)

This change of behaviour is fundamental in the struggle against poverty. The SACC, which in the history of South Africa was one of the important role players in the struggle against apartheid, again recognised the calling of and the challenge to the church amidst the pandemic to act on the menace of increasing poverty. As a result, important guidelines were developed to assist the church in accepting the struggle to change societies.

### Guidelines for the church in the struggle against poverty

If the church is to be an important agent in the struggle against poverty amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, it needs to be empowered. Although many churches have different plans of action, the SACC developed a comprehensive plan of *Local Ecumenical Action Networks* (LEANs). This plan serves as only one example. The SACC recognised that getting through the COVID-19 pandemic requires people to act together where they are. To empower churches, guidelines to work together in communities were developed. The SACC stated: 'The church has been a vehicle for public good and change in this country, let us step up together in this challenging time' (LEAN 2020:1).

The guidelines and a comprehensive Community Action Network (CAN) starter pack was developed by the *Cape Town Together Movement* in the lead up to the national lock down in March 2020 (LEAN 2020:1). The SACC adapted this starter pack for the SACC in establishing LEANs.<sup>3</sup>

### Local Ecumenical Area Networks

According to the starter pack, a LEAN (2020) is:

[A]n existing network (e.g. fraternal, alliance etc) or new group of ten or more churches from a local neighbourhood from different denominations that have connected with each other to collaborate with local action during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. (p. 1)

The goal of these community groups is to address the specific needs of a community with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan entails further that these groups will be made up of at least 10 local church leaders who will connect with each other and who will, after registering their LEAN with the SACC, work together to mobilise their local community to assess and respond to the issues of that specific community with regard to pandemic. The action plan further states that: 'Each LEAN should represent a specific area (e.g. village, township, suburb, ward, or section thereof, etc.). Within these LEANs, there may be several church congregations and neighbourhoods represented, and therefore the network may decide to organise themselves internally according to these structures. The action of the LEANs will be informed by their local contexts' (LEAN 2020:1).

3. Because of the scope of this article, only parts of the plan will be addressed.

This means that the LEANs will become an important network through which the SACC COVID-19 pastoral plan can be activated. The plan entails immediate response to the crisis as well as a springboard for rebuilding a new and a long-term reality of 'greater social cohesion and economic vibrancy at community levels beyond the COVID-19 onslaught' (LEAN 2020:2). This statement makes it clear that the LEANs are important vehicles through which the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic will be addressed. This includes not only the immediate needs in communities such as food and shelter, but also the long-term struggle against poverty. It is clear that the SACC envisions a comprehensive plan that can be implemented by churches where the end goal is a positive change in communities. Most important of all, it also stresses 'collaboration is key'. The church is ideally posed 'to identify other local organisations/structures that are doing similar work and figure out how you can support and add strength to each other in this time' (LEAN 2020:6). If churches in South Africa succeed in doing that, in the words of Van Wyk (2017:5), it will become the carrier of the message of hope, justice and freedom for all South Africans.

Remarks by the Health Minister, Zweli Mkhize, on Sunday 29 June 2020, indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading faster than ever through South Africa. This means that the devastation and poverty escalate to new heights. Mkhize stressed that 'It will be important to engage community, religious and traditional leaders who can motivate individuals to adhere to non-pharmaceutical interventions' (Nqakamba 2020:1). The remarks by Mkhize confirm that the church has a vital role to play in the fight against poverty. The struggle against poverty is not only about providing food parcels, clothes and grants. It entails a bigger picture. It is about changing communities and the attitude of people in communities. If local churches embrace this challenge amidst the pandemic, the crisis presents enormous opportunities for the church to start playing an ongoing and long-lasting role in changing the social face of South Africa.

### Conclusion

John De Gruchy (2004:229) made an important remark before the COVID-19 pandemic when he said that apartheid placed an enormous burden upon people's livelihoods by controlling their access to resources such as land, labour, healthcare and education. In the post-apartheid era, De Gruchy (2004:30) continued, 'communities are still faced by unemployment, poverty, disease, poor housing, poor education, food security, access to land and access to water'. Each of these presents serious problems in communities but taken together 'they represent an "axis of evil" that terrorizes the lives of many South Africans'. Importantly, 'they constitute a key element in the ongoing church struggles in this country' (De Gruchy 2004:230). Pillay (2017:11) emphasises this statement of De Gruchy when he refers to a meeting with Pope Francis<sup>4</sup> where the Pope remarked that 'our faith in Jesus impels us to live charity through concrete gestures capable of affecting our way of life,

4. The meeting took place on the 10th of June 2016.

our relationships and the world around us'. The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated the importance of these remarks.

In this article, I gave an overview of the extent of the poverty crisis in South Africa and how the Bible reflects on poverty before defining poverty within the South African context. I have shown that the church, as an agent of change, is called to respond to the challenge of poverty amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. When reflecting on this call to the church, the words of the Confession the Belhar confession part 4 come to mind again:

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity he is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that he calls his church to follow him in this; that he brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry ...

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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