

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND STRATEGIES TOWARDS POVERTY ALLEVIATION

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Abstract

Poverty is one of the pervasive and complex problems facing humanity especially in the third world countries. In the history of Nigeria, for instance, starting from colonial period, Nigeria has been a country beset with the problem of poverty. They are known as poor farmers, traders, artisans, technicians and who feed from hand to mouth and still they are blessed with intelligent people and rich natural resources like oil. Why is it that government has not done enough in the area of poverty alleviation? However, poverty and attempts to alleviate it is an issue that has continued to linger and generate interest of the government, non-governmental organizations and patriotic individuals. The Catholic Church inspite of its central mandate being spiritual evangelism has continued to participate in the fight against poverty to accomplish Jesus mission to minister to both the poor and the rich. The Catholic Church has got to address the affairs of the people as it is the last hope of the people especially in the moment of distress and pain. The Catholic Church due to their closeness to its poor members remains one of the back bones of poverty alleviation to the rural dwellers. The paper through phenomenological method critically examined the roles of the Catholic Church in poverty alleviation through youth empowerment, community banking, establishment of schools and hospitals etc.

Keywords: Poverty, Unemployment, Alleviation, Catholic, Nsukka

Introduction

Poverty is a global threat to humanity especially Nigeria. The citizens of Nigeria are globally graded as poor nation on the ground that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is abysmally low thus the economy cannot comfortably cater for the teeming population, despite numerous natural and human resources. Nigeria is being challenged by hunger. Poverty is hunger and starvation; it is the deprivations which encompass a shortfall and inadequacies in basic human needs. Olaitan, (2000) sees poverty as the scarcity of human basic needs or man's inability to acquire basic needs for existence. Poverty is a social phenomenon that

embodies many attributes that manifest in various forms in different societies, ages, communities and individuals.

According to Okafor, (2004) poverty is an abject state of being in which an individual is incapable of utilizing resources around him to improve himself economically, socially, politically or otherwise. Poverty as a public policy concern, whether global, national or community level, is now widely considered to be a multidimensional problem. Poverty is not having anything at all. Ebirim (2010) states that poverty entails the absence of the basic requirements for survival, and to an extent the comfort of man. Poverty is hunger and starvation. It is squalor and it is the non-availability of basic medicine. The poor are those who do not enjoy the minimum standard of living consistent with human dignity, those families whose total earnings are insufficient to meet minimum necessities for the maintenance of mere physical efficiency. Poverty may be the scarcity of human basic needs or the inability of an individual or society to acquire human basic needs for existence. In this context, poverty could affect individual or group or community or nation. Individual misfortunes or inability to obtain the basic necessities of life like essential clothing; three meals a day that are nutritious; a habitable house and a means of transportation either by land, sea or air.

In Nigeria, the prevalent situation of mass poverty reflects on corruption, poor implementation of government policies, poor management of our resources and performance of people, which involves her level of productivity. The task of poverty alleviation must therefore begin with identifying and mobilizing our resources to improve our productivity. The rate at which people are getting poorer these days is alarming. To this effect, this paper has surveyed various efforts Catholic Church has made towards alleviation of poverty.

Causes of Poverty

Poverty cannot be attributed to one cause; rather it must be seen as the product of a broad range of factors. Lack of functional education is one of the causes of poverty. Skilled and oriented training is useful and effective as an instrument of cognitive and psychomotor learning (Njoku, 2005). In Nigeria, the only assessment for one to be educated depends only on paper certificate. Without certificate, you are not educated. The skilled and oriented training help in productivity and reduces unemployment in the country whereby unskilled only

depend on government to provide for them meaningful job opportunity before they are employed. In Nigeria today, jobs are hard to get as the population of unemployed youths are too many for the government to control.

Secondly, the structure of the family mostly in Nigeria and Africa in general is another great cause of poverty. A growing proportion of the poor can be seen among simple parent headed households. There are two elements here, which causes poverty either alone or in combination. The first is where the breadwinner's wage is very small, perhaps too small to support the smallest family. The second occurs when the members on dependents in the household stretch the income beyond its capacity. It is their opinion that elements combine in the case of a large family trying to live on a very meager income. The influence of family structure on income is further compounded by gender and race inequality.

Another major causes of poverty in Nigeria is corruption. The level of corruption in Nigeria has become phenomenon in the nation's economy and political system (Vanguard, 2018). The manner in which the Nigeria politicians have looted this country is alarming. They have looted this country dry to the extent that Nigeria is now in economic recession. It has affected every sector of life to the extent that average Nigerian cannot boast of two square meals per day.

Ugwu (2003) notes that the dependent nature of our economic and political system are one of the causes of poverty in the country. For our economic and political systems being dependent on foreign domination, dictation and control, is one of the problems that bedevil our country. Food crisis had become a recurring decimal as hunger ravages our land, unemployment grows by geometrical progression while employment is hard to come by. Prostitution is on the increase, robbery, corruption and indiscipline are the order of the day. Why all these even in a democracy? The economy foundation or stability of any nation rests on her ability to feed the population; not with the American rice or British wheat but with the food produced and processed locally. This is because, as long as food crisis continues to live with us, political instability will be its associate. Ogidigan (1985) observed that political institutions are superstructures resting on real economic foundations. Our problem is also compounded by the fact that we have also developed certain appetites, which cannot be satisfied, with our locally produced items. Our economy is depended because our political system is often

a proto-type of western society and the economy rests mainly on oil sales and our crude oil is manned by expatriates.

Another major cause of poverty in Nigeria is corruption. The manner in which the politicians have looted this country is alarming and it has affected every facet of the society. Both politicians and public servants loot with impunity. Nigeria is a place where political leaders have access to national treasury convert public funds to private use; it is a place where the congress works to undermine anti-corruption campaign; and it is a society with corrupt judiciary. Consequently, political corruption is pandemic in Nigeria, with bureaucratic and electoral corruption, bribery and fraud, embezzlement and extortion with favoritism and nepotism widespread on the political scene. (Okunoye, 2013), sees poverty amidst plenty. What a paradox? This accounts for various security challenges confronting Nigeria

Poverty Alleviation Programmes in Nigeria

Due to Federal Government concern on the high increase of poverty among Nigerian citizens, there was need for poverty eradication. This led to the establishment of many poverty eradication and alleviation programmes in the country. All past and present government in Nigeria made efforts to establish one programme or more but the more they establish them, the citizens get more impoverished. Because of the scope of this study, few programmes are to be mentioned. The first is: Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) which sought to increase local food production and thereby reduce imports. Citizens were encouraged to cultivate any empty plot of land, urban dwellers being encouraged to garden undeveloped building plots. Another one worthy to be mentioned is Department of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI). The aim is to improve the condition of the people in the hinterland and reduce rural areas migration. National Directorate of Employment (NDE) is to fight the problem of mass unemployment. People's Bank (PBN) was established to make credit available to less privileged Nigerians. The establishment of Better Life Programme (BLP) was aimed at improving the life of rural women. National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), Seven-Point Agenda, Youth Entrepreneurship Strategy (YES), SURE-Ps, N-Power etc. All these programmes were aimed to improve the general well-being of Nigeria and make the country become one of the biggest economy in the world.

The Problems of Poverty Reduction Programme in Nigeria

There are many contributing factors militating against poverty reduction in Nigeria. They can be summarized as follows:

Poor Implementation: Most of the times, the government may have good intention when establishing these programmes but because of poor implementation, it yielded very little fruit.

Corruption is another challenge to poverty reduction; most of the times, corrupt politicians will hijack it for themselves, relatives and their political supporters. Due to this, it lacks continuity. Each subsequent government came with a different idea or no idea at all (Hussaini, 2014). The programme became more 'regime specific' because there was hardly any continuity with those initiated by governments. The in-coming government will see it as not his business look into what happened or even to probe the activities of the programme.

The Response of the Church to Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

Apart from the Catholic Church, one can dare to say that other Christian denominations are focusing more interest in heaven than cartering for one another. They have ignored the role the early Christian Church played by living a communal live which in no small measure helped the progress and the unity of the church.

The Catholic Church has helped in many ways in the alleviation of poverty in Nsukka Diocese. Like in the area of freewill donations, the church has made many donations to the less-privilege and also to the sick people who are discharged in the hospital but find it difficult to pay their bills. The rich in the church sometimes donate generously towards the welfare of the poor in their midst. Another one is self-employment or empowerment project which people come together to learn how to bake, make detergent, cream etc. They establish a skill acquisition school which specialize people in catering, home management, sewing, carpentry, music, arts and other allied services in which people with special talents are discovered and enhanced (Obodochina, 2013).

As in many other cultures, the violation of rights of women seems to belong to the order of events. The Catholic Church protects the dignity of women. In connection to that, certain structures were put in place. For instance, the

establishment of the Women Promotion Department of the Diocesan Justice, Development and Peace Caritas/Commission for the welfare of women and the girl-child was unavoidable. The dedication of the Catholic Hostel for female students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was also an initiative geared toward enhancing the status and dignity of women at the level of the university. This diocesan response in favour of the female students of the University of Nigeria became necessary in the context of the acute accommodation problems of the university that failed to address the vulnerability of women folk in relation to the men.

The Catholic Church in its social teachings states clearly that poverty is a threat to humanity. The rich should carry along with the poor because that is the purpose of God's creation. It was on 6 January 1967 that Pope VI created the pontifical commission, 'Justice and Peace. The purpose of its existence was to complete the development of humanity. It was later changed by Pope John II to Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) which was established in every diocese. Achunike, (2004) outlined their work as to develop people, peace, justice and human rights.

The Catholic Church in Nsukka also defends the Inheritance Right of Widows. In theory, the rights of all citizens under the Nigerian constitutions to inherit the properties and bequeaths of their parents or friends and the likes. But in reality, we also know of the awful denial of these rights to widows at the death of their husbands. More especially, when the widow had no son or the children are in tender age. When the diocese receives information concerning such a denial, the diocese through the Human Rights Department of the Justice and Peace Commission will swing into action. This group has done much in the fight for the widows. The existence and operations of the Diocesan Widows Association in the parishes has mitigated by their great group dynamics.

Prayer is a very important weapon to fight against poverty. The Catholic in Nsukka pray for the poor, distressed and progress in the society. All these prayers are channeled against poverty among the people and their appeal to God to intervene in this evil that has eaten deep into the members of the society.

Strategies of the Catholic Church towards Poverty Alleviation

The role of Catholic Church in development is a key component that informs this study. Studies of religion abound, but few have addressed the consistent attention that religious groups have paid to the development process. Religion (also used synonymously with faith or spirituality and consequently the groups propelled by religion do have considered influence on development work. Various development scholars have observed that religion does have an intrinsic value and contributes directly to various dimensions of human well-being (Sen, 1999). The church has always regarded a concern for the poor as its basic duty on earth.

According to the universal call of Christianity, all churches have a twofold task of salvation of souls on the (faith and action). In the Roman Catholic Church tradition, the mandate to reform structures is fulfilled specifically through educational, health, or economic development etc. The Catholic Church in Nsukka Diocese is engaged in activities geared toward alleviation of unemployment and improving the lives of the unemployed in the diocese. This section will examine the main ones.

(i) Church as an Employer

The church is herself a high employer. Many people are employed in the numerous projects run by the church through the diocese. Many people were employed as; watchmen, teachers, accountants, office messengers, divers, etc. This shows that the church has created a lot of job opportunities to the people who probably, would have been unemployed.

(ii) Establishment of Kenekukwu Micro-Finance Bank by the Nsukka Diocese

Since the 1970s, and especially since the new wave of microfinance in the 1990s, microfinance has been seen as an important development policy and a poverty reduction tool (Okezie et al. 2003). Microfinance is an effect development tool for promoting pro-poor growth and poverty reduction.

Kenekukwu Micro-Finance bank of Nsukka diocese provide fund in form of credit and micro-loans to empower the people to engage in productive economic activities which can help boost their income level and thus alleviate poverty. It has the potential to effectively address material poverty, the physical deprivation of goods and services and the income to attain them by granting financial services to households who are not served by the formal banking sector. It enable

poor and low income household to take advantage of economic opportunities, build assets, and reduce their vulnerability to external shocks that adversely affect their living standards(Okezie etal 2003).

(iii) Missionaries introduced modern education into Africa and despite their limited resources built some impressive educational institutions. These institutions produced teachers, artisans, and other man power for the mission and junior workers for the colonial government. In many African country practically all the political leaders who led Africa from colonial rule to independence and the administrator were products of mission schools and colleges (Kinoit, 1996) p51. The school apostolate and Catholic evangelization mission were two sides of the same coin. The two were inseparable ventures (Omeke, 2010) p1.

In pursuance of the educational needs of the diocese, every parish in the diocese was made to establish either a nursery, primary or secondary schools or all within its area of jurisdiction. Some of the secondary schools built in the diocese are: St. Theresa's College (STC) Nsukka, Queen of the Rosary College (QRC) Nsukka, St. Catherine Comprehensive Secondary Nsukka, St. Patrick's Secondary School Obollo Eke, St. Patrick's College Obollo-Afor, St. Francis Secondary School, Ovoko, Holy Trinity College, Iheaka, St. Charles College, Opi, St. Anthony's Skill Centre, Ugbaike, St. Thomas Aquinas College, Ibagwa-Aka, entrepreneur Centre, Uhunowerre, etc. All these schools were established by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Nsukka to help in eradicating or combating poverty through the employment of teachers and non-tutorial staff.

(iv) The Catholic Church has remained faithful to her commitment of mandate to carry out the mission to "heal the sick". The church has been determined in the service to the sick and suffering in an integral part of her mission and not only has she encouraged, among Christians the blossoming of various work of mercy, but she also has established many religious institutions within her specific aim of fostering, organizing, improving and increasing help to sick missionaries who has constantly combined the preaching of the gospel with the help and care of the sick (John Paul II, 1985) p1.

The Catholic Church in Nsukka established the following hospitals: Bishop Shanahan Nsukka, Our Lady Health of the Sick at Adani and the Cottage Ultra-

modern hospital at Enugu-Ezike – St. Mary’s hospital, Bishop Shanahan annex. These hospitals help bringing health to the doorstep of people. It has also reduced poverty through the employment and also paying their salaries.

(v) Establishment of the diocesan scholarship scheme

The diocese has put in place a scholarship scheme that assists the poor but intelligent students from across the deaneries. They are selected after a competitive public examination and interviews, successful candidates are chosen and sent to the diocesan secondary schools. At the completion of their secondary education, further opportunities are granted to such candidate with proven ability for higher education.

(vi) Finally, in the area of agriculture, the agricultural department of the diocesan commission links the rural farmers with the various state provisions for new agricultural developments. Access to new bred crops and fruits, equipments and services including agricultural loan are given to the farmer in a subsidized rate for food autonomy of the people.

Way Forward

Enhancing access to formal finance especially credit has a high likelihood of reducing poverty in rural areas like Nsukka.

The Catholic Church of Nsukka diocese has not done enough as many of the congregations are living in abject poverty. The church should go back to the drawing board and re-visit the early Christian church and also the missionaries whose main work is to convert souls to Christ and carter for the church members. These days, the revise is the case as almost all Rv. Fr. Drive costly cars, live in polish houses while those who contributed to all these trick along the road live in dilapidated houses.

The contemporary church like the ancient Israel should address spiritual as well as material needs by cultivating a new mindset similar to the notion of the mission church in the colonial era in which the Bible and the plough were understood as mutual re-enforcing.

1. The remuneration given to workers ought also to be looked into. It is a well known fact that they pay less than their counterparts in other private school and students also pay higher school fees, patients pay higher in

their bills. The church has done much in the area of poverty alleviation but not enough. Many of the Rev. Frs. and leaders engage in white elephant projects and exorbitant lifestyle, at the negligence and often at the expense of the poor who lacks three square meals per day. They should correct such erring leaders and make for equitable distribution of the wealth of the earth.

2. Dada, (2000) p107 is of the opinion that the church which ought to serve as communal rallying point for its members, is not living up to expectation. Church in Africa should move from individualism to institutionalism, a place where the weak, the poor and the dispossessed find succor as demonstrated by the early church. The church therefore, should make frantic efforts to alleviate the suffering of the poor masses if her impact and relevance will continue to be felt. The church should collaborate with the government to raise the quality of life in Nigeria and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

Recommendations

1. The Catholic Church should create more jobs and empowerment in order to address the level of poverty in Nsukka.
2. They should emulate the ancient Israel who gives their members interest free loan by the government and other financial institutions in order to empower the poor.
3. The government should adopt punitive measures and show commitments and willingness to punish those who sabotage its efforts.
4. The church should develop a theology that could influence policy makers and those in control of finance to have regard for the poor and needy and above all see them as image of God.

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