

The Gospel, Poverty and Displacement in Africa

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Africa is a richly endowed continent and yet is engulfed in poverty of immense proportions. This antithesis of economic existence is explained in part by the structure of African economies. By structure is meant the way and manner in which an economy organizes its human and natural resources for production and distribution. It is a fact that Africa has not mobilized her resources well to allow for the full exploitation of what she is endowed by the Almighty.

In 1993, the per capita income for sub-Saharan Africa was about \$520 per annum. This means that if the value of the total goods and services produced in sub-Saharan Africa in 1993 was to be shared equally among her 550 million inhabitants, each person would have had the equivalent of \$520 for the year. This figure compares very poorly with the average for Belgium which in 1993 had the equivalent of about \$21,000 per person. This simple example illustrates the gravity of the poverty situation in Africa, and for that matter in West Africa. With population growing at about the same rate as output, per capita income in Africa has remained stagnantly low over the years. Civil war, natural disasters, and economic mismanagement have contributed to the general impoverishment of the continent. More people are now under the poverty line than was the case thirty years ago. With all its agricultural potential, Africa is now a net importer of food. Threat of famine and starvation have made some parts of the continent dependent on international aid for survival.

What can be done to alleviate poverty in Africa? In particular, what should be the role of the Church in poverty alleviation schemes? Can the existing forms of diakonia help the poor and the displaced in our society? How can we, as Christians, be able to emulate the example of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, whose life on earth was the very epitome of diakonia? In Matthew 25:31-46, Our Lord made it clear that those to inherit the heavenly kingdom are those who saw to the plight of the poor. This is similar to the promise given to the “poor in spirit”, in Matthew 5:3. But who is the

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“poor”?

Being a layman, I will not venture into the spiritual aspects of poverty. Nevertheless, permit me to borrow from the Scriptures again in trying to explain who the poor is. In the passage in Matthew 25 referred to earlier, some characteristics of the poor are supplied: hungry, thirsty, sick, without clothes and without shelter. In more mundane terms, we can say that generally, poverty results from a lack of human, physical and financial capital needed to sustain livelihoods, and from inequities in access to, control of, and benefits from resources, be they political, social or economic.

Thus poverty entails living in a state of deprivation that is multidimensional in nature. It includes:

- ξ Material deprivation - lack of income, resources and assets.
- ξ Physical weakness - malnutrition, sickness, disability, lack of strength.
- ξ Isolation - illiteracy, lack of access to education and resources, peripheral locations, marginalization and discrimination.
- ξ Vulnerability - to contingencies which increase poverty (e.g. war, climatic changes, seasonal fluctuations, disability).
- ξ Powerlessness - the inability to avoid poverty or change the situation.

There are no good measures of poverty and the distinction between the poor and the non-poor is often a matter of subjective judgment. One can sometimes make the distinction between the poor and non-poor against an absolute standard of welfare (e.g. amount of income, consumption, life expectancy, housing conditions). Thus, for example, if you know a family living just on gari and water, you would conclude that it is poor family. As against this absolute measure of poverty, there is also the relative measure which identifies the poor by relating their position to another individual or an international average. Thus in relative terms we can distinguish between the poor and the extreme poor. The latter group represents the "poorest of the poor" and is generally the poorest 10-20 percent. The extreme poor (also sometimes referred to as the "hard-core poor") are more likely to be underweight, susceptible to illness, and have higher mortality rates; they are the least likely to own

assets (e.g. land) and have severe fluctuations in their employment status. Their immediate challenge is to obtain adequate food/nutrition in order to survive. If their income increased, they would spend proportionately more on food than anything else.

Although qualitative indices are very relevant for understanding the poor, they can also give rise to speculative conjectures. Thus in most cases poverty analysis is based on quantitative expressions using income expenditures. Apart from the more conventional approach based on income expenditures, the amount of calorie in-take and even social indicators such as security, freedom from harassment and dignity can all indicate poverty levels [Chambers, 1988]. Salmen (1992) defines as absolute poor those with income-per-person too low to afford 2,250 calories per day and thus at risk of poverty-induced under-nutrition.

Since independence, most African countries have gone through turbulent times. Political stability has eluded a number of countries in the West African region. Ghana and Nigeria have experienced numerous coup d'états. Others have been under autocratic rule under which a few privileged ones had access to essential commodities. Economic mismanagement led to waste of resources in the region. Thus, twenty years into independence, most countries in the region found themselves faced with tough economic conditions. The decline in the economy brought with it more economic ills such as bribery and corruption, black-marketing, nepotism, favouritism and in the case of Ghana, as in other countries, 'kalabule' - a system in which the haves took advantage of the have-nots. These economic problems accentuated the unequal distribution of resources and worsened the poverty situation in most African countries.

After 30 years of independence, no country in West Africa can boast of a literate population (more than three-quarters illiterate), availability of safe drinking water to all (less than a third), health for all, and abundant supply of food, clothing and shelter for all. Instead, by 1980 all the indicators of social well being were showing a sorry state for the region.

From about the middle of the 1980s, most countries in the region initiated some form of economic reform with help from the Bretton Woods institutions. These reforms involved the

stabilization of the economies through rationalizing economic behaviour and the liberalization of markets in the first instance and then the initiation of programs that have the potential of placing these economies on a growth path. Unfortunately not all countries implemented the reforms with the same degree of commitment and thus have varying degrees of success or failure. Ghana is reputed to be one of the few countries which exhibited some measure of success. For this reason I will devote the rest of the time to use Ghana as a case study to illustrate the changing patterns of poverty in West Africa.

It has been observed that the process of structural adjustment by its very nature inflicts severe short-run hardship on certain vulnerable groups. These include (i) rural households (ii) low income underemployed or unemployed urban households; and (iii) retrenched workers who lack productive employment. In Ghana poverty persists despite the impressive growth statistics at the macro-level over the adjustment period, and significant improvement in social indicators (such as under five mortality rates, life expectancy and net primary enrolment rates). The progress in social and economic indicators has not translated into proportional gains for the majority of the population.

Before we give an analysis of the poverty situation in Ghana it is worth pointing out that a 'before and after' analysis is not possible because of the absence of any comprehensive data in the period preceding the structural adjustment programme. Nevertheless, few studies on poverty in Ghana conclude that in spite of the impressive growth statistics at the macro-level, both the absolute and relative levels of poverty increased among both the rural and urban populations during the adjustment period.

Rough estimates provided by Reginald Green (1988) also showed a greater increase in poverty. His figures showed that the number of urban people below the poverty line increased from average of between 30 and 35 percent in the late 1970s to a range of 45-50 in mid 1980s. For rural people, there was also an increase in poverty from a range of 60-65 percent in late 1970s to between 67 and 72 percent in mid 1980s.

Data received from various household living standard surveys have shown that in Ghana as a

result of the structural adjustment programme, the percentage of the population classified as poor dropped from about 56 per cent in 1987/88 to 51 per cent in 1991/92, after hitting a high of 61 per cent in 1988/89. Given that macro indices of structural adjustment appeared better in 1987-1990 more than in latter years, it is quite apparent that the poverty-reducing effects of SAP operates with a lag.

The adjustment programme seemed to have hit different localities differently; in particular, changes in relative prices are likely to have affected different indexes differently. Poverty levels in Accra have increased substantially over the adjustment period. This may be due to the fact that most of the adjustment policies had a direct impact on the urban public sector. The retrenchment policies as well as the pegging of increases in the wage bill to only 5 per cent of GDP, reduced the income of the urban public sector worker. However, other urban areas as well as rural-coastal and rural-forest localities had reductions in poverty levels. Rural-savanna continues to be the poorest zone in the country with more than half its population classified as poor and more than a third being very poor in 1992. In spite of the increases in poverty levels in Accra, it still remains the locality with the least poor, although it is gradually declining to the national average.

The structural adjustment has produced more dramatic changes in the poverty profile of the different socioeconomic groups. The retrenchment exercises worsened people's standard of living while the persistently high inflation rate and the marginal increases in salary scales reduced real incomes for fixed wage earners. In spite of the increase in proportion of the poor among them, public sector poverty is still below the national average, while their average expenditure levels are also above the national average.

Contrary to the general supposition that the devaluations have switched terms of trade in favour of the tradable sector and hence should help farmers who export, the evidence suggests their poverty reduction over the adjustment period has not been much different from that of the non-export food farmers.

Workers in the private sector seemed to have increased their living standards over the adjustment period. This may be a direct result of the removal of trade and foreign exchange restrictions under the adjustment programme. Establishments which were grossly under-utilized before the SAP because of lack of foreign exchange now have easy access to it for the purchase of spare parts and raw materials. Further, those in commerce have had their trade boosted by the trade liberalization.

Gender analysis of poverty profiles in Ghana presents an interesting finding. On the average about thirty per cent of households in Ghana are headed by women; but this proportion seems to be increasing with the years. This may be a symptom of the increasing unemployment in the formal sector which is dominated by men. However, it appears this has been good in terms of poverty reduction. Data from the Living Standards Survey shows that poverty levels in female headed households have reduced over the years. The proportion of non-poor female headed households increased from 25.9 per cent in 1988 to 32.1 per cent in 1992.

In sum, it appears that poverty reducing effects of structural adjustment trickles down with a lag. The poverty indices from the Ghana Living Standard Survey, 1987-1992, have shown that between 1987 and 1989 the overall poverty level in the country went up. By 1992, some of the benefits of the gains made with structural adjustment have started having poverty alleviating effects. One should mention here that the poor performance of the economy since 1992 will also have adverse poverty effects.

Now that we know what poverty is and the factors that impact on it, the question is what should the Church do to help alleviate poverty. The Church has been known to offer various services to the communities in which they exist. It is on record that most schools and health services were initiated by missionaries who visited our shores. Counselling has been another area in which the Church has played a leading role.

We urge that the Church should be more active in matters of poverty alleviation. One major

way to alleviate poverty is to increase the national cake. The Church must venture into productive activities in order to create more goods and services. As mentioned earlier, structural adjustment policies by their nature engender poverty in the short run. This does not mean we should stop restructuring our economies. The economic restructuring must go on. However, the Church and other social groups should help with poverty alleviation.

The Church It is more difficult to wait for poverty situation to occur before intervening. This is because targeting becomes a problem. As we said earlier, is not easy to find out who is poor. It is possible that the old lady who every month walks up the aisle to give her tithe is so poor she can hardly afford three square meals a day. Should Christian charity neglect her and opt for a big donation to a hospital which gets splashed in our newspapers?

Christian service should be pro-active. The Church must invest its resources well and use it to service the poor in and out of its community. A number of Church organizations just invest their resources in treasury bills and are happy to reap good interest on it. But how much of the interest is ever shared to the poor? How many times in the year do our churches cook food and invite the poor to participate? I leave you with these questions to ponder and deliberate on, and pray that the Lord will open our hearts and minds to perform his service well.