Overcoming poverty through Faith Based Organisation’s in Mbeere-land of Kenya

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Christian Faith Based Organizations are one of the largest sectors of development agencies making a significant contribution towards the historical development process and its specific interventions in Mbeere-land of Kenya. The organisations identified as Christian Faith Based Organizations in this article include Christian organizations ranging from Churches, Christian community development or social services registered groups, the local, regional, national and international components of Christian civil society who engage in various dimensions and agendas of development. In the researchers’ argument, in this article, they insist that faith based organization and the rest of society, should all strive to bring abundance of life in both Mbeere-land and beyond. Topics they argued on, is the Transformational Development that the 21st century Africa is in dire need of. Is there any theological justification for it? Does the work of Christian Faith Based Organizations contradict the efforts of the church or compliment it? In this presentation, the role of significant faith based organizations, such as World Vision and Joint Development Associates are sampled to demonstrate their critical values to the locality. Certainly, there is evidence that many of these Christian Faith Based Organizations provide benefits and impacts that are not always recognized and measurable. Clearly, these organizations tend to instil a sense of belonging, purpose and meaning by offering skills, promoting relationships, health, good morals, spiritual and pastoral guidance, reformed dimensions of development and the creation of a viable natural and socio-political environment for development. Additionally, these organizations tend to provide a real and significant presence in communities dealing with human needs at a personal, family, social group, village, community institutions at individual and corporate levels, from Christian faith value and practice perspectives.

Key words: Faith-based organizations, poverty eradication, development agencies, Mbeere-land, Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Mbeere District covers a total area of 2,092.5 km with a total population of 183,166. The district borders Embu District to the northwest, Tharaka District to the north, Mwingi District to the east, Machakos District to the south and southeast and Kirinyaga District to the west. It has two electoral or parliamentary constituencies, namely Siakago and Gachoka. The two Districts (Mbeere South and Mbeere North), part of Embu County of Kenya, are sparsely populated, with the majority of the population concentrating around major market centres like Siakago, Ishiara, Kiritiri, Karaba and Gachoka. These sites have fairly well developed infrastructure and have good potential for business enterprises. Evurori Division has the highest number of pockets of poor people followed by Mwea, Siakago and Gachoka respectively. The base line survey of poverty conducted in Mbeere located the majority of the poor in Ndurumori and Kiangombe locations in Evurori division, Makima and Riakanau in Mwea division and Mutitu, Muminji, Kiambere and Mutuobare in Siakago division (Mbeere District Development Plan, 2002 – 2008). Generally, the District is an arid or semi-arid area and the majority of the population is poor, with about 60 per cent of its population living below the poverty line of US$1 per
person per day (Mbeere District Development Plan, 2002 – 2008).

To address the biting poverty in Mbeere-land, key institutions have attempted to address the poverty albeit with mixed signals. These players include members of the national assembly with their Constituency Development Fund (CDF), the Embu County, the national government of Kenya, the Churches in Mbeere and more importantly, the faith based organizations. The researchers’ point of focus in this article is the Christian Faith Based Organizations (CFBOs), which they argue, plays a significant role in their social transformation of the locality. Are they theologically justified to carry out their poverty eradication crusades?

Research Motivation, Methods and Justification of the Article

The research and the subsequent publication of this article is motivated by the researchers’ interest to seek to understand the nature and effectiveness of Christian practices in response to the multi-dimensional nature of poverty common in the marginal and poor Arid and Semi Arid Lands (ASAL) in the context of Mbeere districts of Kenya. The research that culminated into the publication of this article employed exploratory case study research method which examines the general assumption that the grassroots positions of Christian Faith Based Organizations (CFBOs) in African rural communities’ life provide better premises to reduce poverty if their development strategies are pro-poor and designed for poverty reduction. The article adds knowledge to the academic disciplines of theology and development particularly in the fields of pastoral theology and transformational development perspectives. A focus is directed more to exploring the effectiveness of CFBOs’ development strategies towards the reduction of transient and absolute or chronic poverty among the households and specific social groups which, prevail in some localities of the ASAL of Mbeere. According to Green [1] Sub-saharan Africa as a whole has about 90 percent of the absolute poverty in poor households located in the rural local context. The ongoing crisis of poverty in Mbeere in spite of numerous development organizations calls for an exploration and examination of development strategies undertaken by these organizations. This is in order to assess effectiveness, gaps and limitations of development strategies with the objective of recommending specific reform or further research on what needs to be improved, dropped or added to ensure improved performance focused on poverty reduction.

Curiously, most CFBOs lack capacities on various areas of development expertise, others focus more on spiritual development and a few take a holistic approach to development. The increase in popularity, numerous establishment and history of CFBOs in development interventions and process in Mbeere justifies choosing CFBOs for this case-study-research instead of secular development agencies. In spite of the operations of numerous CFBOs among the poor, poverty in Mbeere is still problematic and improved development agenda is required right away. Therefore, the irony of a poverty crisis, in spite of ongoing development strategies facilitated by the CFBOs and secular organizations, becomes a critical issue. This prompts an interest to explore and seek to understand what is going on, what is missing, and what needs to be done, in order to promote the effectiveness of CFBOs’ development strategies focused on poverty reduction as a Christian practice, with implications for pastoral theology and the parameters of theological response.

Conceptual Clarifications on Abundance of life

The conceptual framework of poverty reduction theory in this article is taken from approaches oriented on a multi-dimensional approach with concepts, structures, strategies, policies, impacts, interventions and processes, which require pro-poor development strategies that are predominantly holistic and transformational in design. Initially poverty and poverty reduction in the field of development was understood solely from an economic perspective. Stenger [2] remarked that poverty reduction is a complex process that requires the perspectives of a wider range of disciplines. He further noted that a strong conceptual framework is vital to assuring the effective operationalisation and implementation of poverty reduction programmes since the contemporary conceptual approaches to poverty reduction is not consistent. The concept is mostly based on material patterns of income or consumption. Its driving force has been economic growth driven to bring material benefits to the poor. Raising real incomes has been the major aim of this theory [3]. Qureshi [4] described this theory as, 'purely economic growth oriented' which does not offer adequate solution to the problem of complex multi-dimensional poverty. The objective of the anti-poverty approach was to raise income level of the poor groups to be above the poverty line. The theory assumed that the reduction of poverty would result in an increase in national welfare and an end of the worst forms of income inequalities. In this article, poverty reduction theory is based on multi-dimensional factors inclusive of the initial economic orientation, social, environmental, political, intellectual, psychological and spiritual dimensions of sustainable transformational growth. As Edward [5] put it, development is more than economic growth, being a process of enrichment in every aspect of life. Material benefits achieved through economic growth are an essential part of development but are neither the entirety of the means nor the end in pro-poor development. The framework taken in this thesis is of antipoverty theory
driven by socio-economic development and inclusive of other relevant multi-dimensional development approaches. Abbas [6] in a discussion paper entitled ‘Poverty Reduction Strategies in Malaysia, 1971–1995; Major Features’ shares the same concerns that the idea of pro-poor development should not be directed solely at maximizing national economic growth but should be broadened to include not only the need to balance growth with equitable distribution but also a host of other factors. The article also considers the elements of a common diagnostic framework of poverty reduction which Silota [7] outlined as:

Definition of poverty, Identifying the poor, selecting the models (these must link the causes and effects of poverty)¹, Identifying and choosing interventions², Monitoring the target population and Impact assessment. These elements establish objective criteria for determining the poverty reduction strategies to apply.

The subjects of poverty focused on by the theory include transient and chronic poverty, which can be identified among individuals, families, households, age-groups, gender, sub groups and ethnic communities in the particular local contexts in Mbeere. Poverty reduction of transient and chronic poverty differs, though similar to some extent. The transient poverty is temporary, caused by cyclical or temporary factors, and can be experienced for a short period of time [8]. Hulme [9] shares the same concept when he writes that chronic poverty differs from transient poverty in terms of duration and a more multi-dimensional sense of poverty, and the greater severity experienced by the poor situation. A number of poverty frameworks may be useful for understanding and measuring chronic poverty. Hulme et al. [10] summarizes reviews of concepts of chronic poverty by Kanbur and Squire [11] and World Bank [12] to include; material poverty, money metric measurement approaches and multi-dimensional concepts of poverty, absolute and relative poverty, subjective poverty assessment [13], capabilities and freedoms [14] and vulnerability.

**Christian Faith Based Organizations operating in Mbeere-land**

From participant observation method, the researchers noted that some of the Christian Faith Based Organizations (CFBOs) operating in Mbeere-land of Embu County, Kenya, include; Christian Child Fund (CCF), Christian Community Services (CCS) renamed Anglican Development Services (ADS), Christian Community Services Mt. Kenya East Christian Faith Based Organisation (CCSMKE CFBO), Child Development Centre (CDC), Community Health Workers (CHWs), Compassion International Kenya Christian Faith Based Organisation (CIK CFBO), Compassion International Kenya (CIK), Diocese of Mbeere Christian Faith Based Organisation (DOM CFBO), World Vision and Joint Development Associates (JDA) among others. In particular, World Vision and Joint Development Associates (JDA) are some of the CFBOs which have directly championed the transformational development perspective in their development interventions and policies. Their commitment to this approach is clear in their vision and mission statements as well as in their practices.

The World Vision statement of Vision and Mission reads:

Our vision for every child, life in all its fullness; our prayer for every heart, the will to make it so (Vision Statement).

World Vision is an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God (Mission Statement) [15]. World Vision goes further to look at the sustainability side of Transformational Development and what is being transformed. One of the key goals of World Vision is to bring sustainable transformational development for the whole community by addressing the symptoms and causes of poverty. The rationale for adding the sustainability concept to Transformational Development is to bring a lasting transformation to all people. It encourages an integrated process where the whole community is working together with World vision for lasting improvement, by tapping local resources to make the development programmes sustainable. The changes expected are below the surface, finding ways for the community to overcome the causes, structures and consequences of poverty. World Vision measures sustainable Transformational Development by checking the communities’ ownership of the goals. Unless the community takes ownership of their goals they can be continually dependent on aid or donor funding; and this would make sustainable transformational development a nightmare and problematic. According to World Vision, other core indicators of Sustainable Transformational Development include; infant mortality rates reduced to at least below 10%, use of local resources increase as external support decreases, local community takeover of project management, accessible markets for the locally produced products, and the creation of consumer/producer relationships that enhance economic sustainability. World Vision takes their interventions as a vocation - the calling to serve the neediest people of the earth, to

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¹Stryker D. J. (2001) Selection of models may involve alleviation of the effects or symptoms of poverty versus amelioration of its root causes, utilisation of direct versus indirect mechanism of poverty reduction, and using money-metric, participatory, or social analytical techniques.

²Interventions involve examining not only alternative models and approaches available for poverty reduction but also past history and constraints. Interventions may be concentrated at the macro, meso, or micro levels.
relieve their suffering and to promote the transformation of their wellbeing. In the researchers’ own assessment, the World Visions concept of transformational development is based on the transformation of poor people and seems to have no place for the transformation of affluent people. It emphasizes more on human transformation a fact which implicitly may imply that transformation of humanity could be the transformation of the rest of creation resources. This may not be true. A shift in the transformation framework needs to be done so as to be inclusive of both poor and affluent, and focus on the transformation of creation resources where human beings are just part of it. However, the prime focus of transformation seems to be very appropriate for it values the realisation of living life in its fullness – abundant life. The only weakness in the latter prime focus is the limitation of the vision to the life in fullness for every child, which brings the question of what are the place of each human adult and the rest of the creation resources in World Vision transformational development perspective.

According to Joint Development Associates (JDA), transformational development is to do with deeply rooted change in worldviews, values, attitudes, actions and relationship structures bettering the socio-economic, political and spiritual dimensions of life (multi-dimensionality) transforming individuals, families, social groups and the community at large. JDA regards the creative capacity of each person as at the heart of the transformational development process. Each person is said to have unique creative abilities to make a difference in their lives, in their families, in their communities and their nation. JDA helps catalyze transformational development by investing in individuals to help them realize their unique creative potential in solving their own problems, transforming their own lives as well as their families and communities. Societies that are most successful in helping its people realize their creative potential is the society that will be most successful. The dynamic creativity of people is also the source of improvement in human well-being and wealth creation. The nations that provide the most individual freedom for creativity will ultimately generate the most human well-being, prosperity and real wealth. Progress is dependent on many factors but the driving force for progress is the human capacity to create. The only impediment to this is a fearful or limited concept of the real source of our wealth, a lack of faith, fatalistic attitudes or a worldview that looks to the past and not to the future. Progress happens, development happens, as free individuals and institutions create new ideas to unfold new processes and discover new resources to develop. According to JDA the indicators of transformational development in the societies can be seen when they have liberty or freedom to imagine, theorize, conceptualize, experiment, invent, articulate, organize, manage, solve problems with their minds and hands that contribute to the progress of the individual, their families, communities and nation. Here we find that Transformational Development is to deal with transforming individuals, families, social groups and community at large by changing their worldviews, values, attitudes, actions and relationship structures in order to improve the socio-economic, political and spiritual dimensions of life (multi-dimensional) through a dynamic creative and innovative response by all people involved in a particular intervention and process of poverty reduction. Transformational Development encourages both the individuals and communities to maximize the improvement and sustainable utilization of their local resources and livelihoods so as to meet all dimensions of human and environmental needs for a total human transformation.

**Abundance of life**

Evangelical theologians tend to value the Kingdom of God as the fundamental biblical and theological concept behind the elaboration of a transformation approach. People were created to live within the kingdom of God and that they thrive under its rule (Mtt. 6:25-34). Therefore, it is by living by the principles of the Kingdom of God, that people reach their maximum potential and experience life in all its fullness. The Kingdom of God is central in Jesus ministry of preaching, teaching and social actions. He appealed to people to seek first the kingdom of God and the rest will be added (Mtt. 6:33). Ideally however, every kingdom or state does not exist just for its own sake but exists with a role of promoting, protecting, and sustaining the wellbeing of its citizens by all worth means so that life can be lived to its fullness. Transformational development too is a sustainable and significant instrument of the kingdom of God to facilitate the fulfillment of living on abundant life. Indeed, Transformational development framework should lead to the absolute realisation of the transformed living and life which is part of the abundant life. It should not stop at basic aspects of holism but should go beyond to pointing and enabling humanity to have abundant life restored to them so as to live life in full as God intends. In his mission statement Jesus Christ confirmed that he had come so that people may have life and have it more abundantly. The Greek word Jesus uses in John 10:10 (New Testament Bible) to describe the abundant life is *perissōn*, meaning “superabundant,” “superfluous,” “overflowing,” “over and above a certain quantity,” “a quantity so abundant as to be considerably more than what one would expect or anticipate”. It is not “just” life, however, that Jesus promises; it is life beyond measure, plentiful, and abundant – a meaningful wellbeing of all people and their environments. Therefore, it should be from the priority and role of the Kingdom of God to ensure the realisation of abundant life that all the agents...
of transformation development should focus their aims and objectives. The vocation of the CFBOs among poor people and contexts should be a commitment to promote, protect and sustain life in all its fullness. Thus the engagement in poverty reduction would be meaningful if it facilitates the living of life in all its fullness.

In response to the position of the Church in Ethiopia towards socio-political issues, Kobia [16] is reported to have said; “Jesus Christ came into the world to give abundant life. This signifies the intrinsic connection between our quest for visible unity of the church and engagement in a life-centred ministry”. Abundant life is a boundless life which brings meaning and purpose to life for it addresses all spheres of the life of humanity and creation resources now and not yet. It is accessible by all humanity through a participatory belief in God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Jesus abundant life teaching confirms his primacy of the "person over things" and of "being over having." Abundant life lies in connecting our holistic lives to the life of God who is the author, source, sustainer and destiny of our life. In view of the above, Transformational Development should be Life-centred – a framework of development advocating life – encouraging and guiding the worlds of affluent and of the poor to choose life for self and others, so that life in the world can be promoted, protected and sustained by all people and their enterprises from one generation to the other. God is reported to have advised Israelites who were in a new land facing new situations and vulnerable to idolatry and unjust ‘short-cut’ means of live to choose life - "Choose life so that you and your descendants might live" (Deuteronomy 30:19). Transformational Development then is a matter of ensuring life is valued and maintained in all spheres of living in the now and not yet world – present and future world. Of critical importance to note is that Transformational Development from the poor village to the affluent village should be instrumental in challenging and replacing evil forces of death in the society and all the other unjust systems which rob and destroy life of humanity and creation resources. Poverty with all its multi-dimensional nature is one of the consequences of the working of evil forces through different systems, institutions, policies, attitudes and ideas in the world whose activities have led to threatening, limiting and robbing many of abundant life to the point of destroying and killing it. The Transformation framework should have mechanisms and indicators to measure what is abundant life and how to identify which people and environmental aspects whose life is threatened, robbed and being destroyed. As part of the quest for the indicators of abundant life among individuals and society, questions can be raised such as; in what ways has the CFBO made a choice for life so that people in the community may have fullness of life? What are the signs that people in the community lack life in full or live life in its fullness? Is the abundant life that Jesus promises personal and individual only, or public and corporate also? How would you describe the abundant life; is it physical, spiritual, or both? In what ways can one share onto others the abundant life? What does abundant life have to do with poverty reduction? What do integrated development interventions and processes have to do with living abundantly? However, there is a danger of having the meaning and measurements of fullness of life understood differently by people from their different worldviews and mindsets. Hence, each locality inclusive of its differences should be encouraged to redefine life, and live on what would be valued as the fullness of life in the light of the values of life in the Kingdom of God.

Theologically, God is the Lord of all life; who directed us to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:22, 28), provided food (Gen. 1:29-30; 9:2-4; cf. Mt. 6:25), and calls us to exercise stewardship over life on earth (Gen. 1:26, Ps. 8:6-8). In the Passover and the exodus, God called Israel from serving dead idols to living life abundantly in a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:8). In Jesus’ resurrection, the church was “born anew to a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3) as we are ‘made alive in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:22). Our deliverance from death to life means that we must faithfully serve life, for we serve life’s risen Lord (Col. 3:17). Jesus Christ came that all “may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus’ feeding of the hungry crowd, healing and raising the dead, and challenging of injustices show us that abundant life includes holistic needs in all spheres of living and wellbeing. Yet his suffering and death declare that neither biological existence nor bodily health is an ultimate good (see 1 Cor. 15:53). Abundant life includes reconciliation and peace – resulting in a reconciled and peaceful community; Jesus breaks down every “dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14) so that we might “pursue peace with everyone” (Matt. 5:9; Heb. 12:14). Abundant life serves others as Jesus did, fulfilling both the law and the prophets by embodying love for all (Ex. 22; Is. 58; Matt. 25). God ultimately intends abundant life for the community of all—humanity and every creature and the cosmos itself—reconciled to God in Christ (Eph. 1:10)

Scripture reveals God as the source, goal, and Lord of all life. He is the promoter, protector and sustainer of life. God is alive, “eternal” and “immortal,” the “living God.” God is life, fully revealed and given in Jesus Christ (John 1:4). In promoting life He shares life, through creation, procreation, production and redemption, with us and all that lives. We are called in Christ to be “a fragrance from life to life” (2 Cor. 2:16). Receiving new life in Christ calls us to seek abundant life for all in grateful response, hopeful anticipation, and joyful service to Christ. Human beings as ‘God’s image and likeness’ are for life because God is for life (Matt. 22:32). They are called to be consistently for life because God values all life (John. 4:11; Matthew. 6:26). Christians ought to live out this call in a world opposed to it. Therefore, being consistently for
life will often look more like crucifixion than resurrection. A "culture of death" dominates our fallen world. Life is destroyed by poverty, unjust political governance, organized genocides for instance Rwanda, Darfur in Sudan, ethnic clashes (Kenya 1992, post December 27, 2007 Kenyan elections) moiety conflicts, environmental degradation, acts of terrorism, and perpetual wars. Abundant life can be extinguished by both grinding poverty and empty excess, by both tyranny and individualism, by chronic hunger, relentless addiction, or lack of meaningful work. This ‘culture of death’ even masquerades as abundant life, offering false forms of freedom, satisfaction, and safety. It has too often captured the Christian imagination, keeping us from receiving, living, and serving abundant life in Christ.

In its protective and sustaining aspect of life, transformational development encourages repentance by individuals and society in complicity with the culture of death. It leads people to resist death and the culture of death in their daily thoughts, actions and attitudes, through their practices and policies. Scripture teaches that humans have a special dignity—they are created in the “image of God” (Gen. 1), “crowned with glory and honour” (Ps. 8), the centre of God’s incarnation (Heb. 2). As bearers of God’s image, every person in the world has a special calling to be stewards of all life (Gen. 1:28; 2:15); live as a fellow brother’s keeper (Gen. 4:9), our neighbour’s servant (Luke 17), our enemy’s intercessor (Matt. 5:44). People who are transformed or are becoming transformed need to focus consistently for life as God is for life, to consistently serve life as God does. In the beginning, God creates life in marvellous diversity, beauty, and goodness (Gen. 1-2). God breathes life into dust to create humankind (Gen. 2:7) and all living creatures (Ps. 104:30; Ecc. 3:19). God’s Spirit is the giver of life (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6). In God “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). We receive life with thanksgiving as a gift from God.

Conclusion

The article has examined the Christian faith-driven development framework which emphasizes Christian values and perspectives on a sustainable, holistic and transformational development. It has also explored theological justification for CFBOs. Certainly, Transformational Development inevitably covers the transformation of exploitative spiritual and socio-political-economic relationships and all other limitations in all dimensions of life. However, the weakness of transformation as a Christian perspective as development is that it may not be an appropriate and a meaningful development approach in a religiously ignorant, pluralistic and post-modern context where the idea of abundant life and the values of the Kingdom of God maybe regarded as insignificant – empty or utopian concepts. However, transformational development would be the appropriate development perspective and framework in a continent, nation or local context where religion and particularly Christian religion, spirituality or faith is not only categorised as part of a human capital and social capital but also as a capital by itself. Historically, religion has been perceived both as an obstacle to as well as a positive facilitator for social change and development. The focal contention of this article thus, is that due to its holistic multi-development nature, transformational development is an appropriate theological and development management perspective which is an effective towards poverty reduction because of the multi-dimensional, complex nature of poverty. Christian faith-based organizations as key Christian actors in the local, regional, national and international development work should rethink their development perspectives. They could consider adapting a sustainable and holistic transformational development framework for the meaningful realisation of the transformed life in all spheres of wellbeing – the abundant life. Specifically, the challenge remains on what can be done to have the CFBOs improve the nature of their transformational development activities so as to promote, protect and sustain life in its fullness in the worsening situation and trend of poverty in Mbeere District Kenya be one case against many. Transformational development is complementing the development framework, filling the gaps left by the ongoing dominating secular perspectives of development in the world.

In view of this, the framework of transformational development by most of the noted conceptualisations is limited to human transformation and dominated by a focus on the transformation of poor people. A radical shift in the transformational development framework, need to be done, so as to be inclusive of the poor and affluent people as well as focusing on transformation of the creation resources where human beings are just part of it and not necessarily the dominating or/and the only factor. Finally, Transformational Development should be abundant life and creation resources centred – a framework of development advocating full life – encouraging and guiding the world of the affluent and the poor to choose life for self and others so that life in the world can be promoted, protected and sustained by all people and their enterprises from one generation to another.

References

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