

Examining the Role of the Church in Socio-Economic Development of the Rural Poor in the Sub-Saharan Region: Insights from Previous Research and Future Research Directions

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Abstract

There is an increasing attention on the role of the church in development at the global, regional, national and local levels especially among poor communities in developing countries. The church as a social institution plays an important role in the spiritual and socio-economic development of its members and communities yet there is paucity of studies on its role especially in the marginalized rural settings in sub-Saharan Africa region. This paper presents a systematic review of previous research on socio-economic development of poor and marginalized communities in the SSA. Specifically, it aims to examine the impact of the church in various contexts in championing initiatives for improving lives in poor communities. It also seeks to establish the gaps in knowledge to inform more studies in church-driven socio-economic development and to analyze methodological and theoretical gaps in the practice of church-driven socio-economic development. The study has been conducted through a desktop review of selected journal articles on the topic of church and development. Gaps in knowledge, theory, methodology, analysis and interpretation are synchronized from the previous studies. While acknowledging various theological standpoints harbored by churches, the paper proposes that to be effective in development, churches have to work together to collaborate and complement each other in socio-economic development initiatives. In order to formulate a universal church's approach to development, it is recommended that deliberate efforts be made to undertake quality studies that go beyond local churches to embrace a developmental framework for the universal church. More mainstreaming of existing studies is also required in order to inform and enrich theory and practice of the universal church in socio-economic development.

Keywords: Poverty alleviation, rural marginalized communities, socio-economic development, church, Sub-sahara Africa

Introduction

The church predates the modern states as we know them. As a precursor to the creation of modern states in most former colonies, the church has had a preeminent role in the country's development agenda; from education to healthcare and to politics and governance. Equally, as a spiritual and social institution, the church has always made strides in uplifting the socio-economic status of its followers and communities as a whole. All over the world, churches and faith-based organizations are known to play an important role in the development of a community (Magezi, 2017). The socio-economic role that the church plays is beneficial to the communities and the nations at large. Kioko (2020) asserts that churches participate actively in the socio-economic transformation of the community in any part of the globe.

Ndegwa et al. (2018) state that participation of the church in economic development started with the African-American church in the united states of America where the church was seen as both an institution of communal worship and economic development. In the same breath, Alowode (2016) observes that the church has not only a role in evangelism, but also in being included in progressive development. Development projects ascribed to the church have also been initiated in the African countries. Ndegwa et al. (2018) further asserts that the Catholic relief service, a humanitarian church organization working in Africa, is a clear example of what the church has done to improve on the socio-economic status of the community. The Kenyan context has also attracted scholarly attention hence many scholars have acknowledged participation of the church in development in such projects as establishment of village polytechnics, hospitals and universities among others.

Even though the role of the church in development is quite evident, nonetheless, several scholars have observed that the role of the church in development has remained overshadowed in the post-colonial states as the states assumed more developmental roles. For instance, Magezi (2017) observes that though churches are key community institutions that play a crucial role in community development, their role is not well understood from an empirical perspective. Kioko (2020) also points out that though the church's role in development is more often than not overshadowed by that of the state, it is important to note that the presence and influence of the church in our modern societies cannot be assumed or simply taken for granted. Therefore, understanding its role in advancing the development agenda is important.

The slow pace of socio-economic development in the Sub-Saharan Africa in contrast to the increasing population and incessant conflicts is a major concern not only to the developed world but to the Christian churches spreading the gospel of Christ in the region. The World Bank Group in the last decade predicted a general fall in the poverty incidence across the globe with the exception of Sub-Sahara Africa. Whereas the incidence of global poverty in the developing world was to fall from 33-18%, the poverty incidence level in Sub-Saharan region was predicted to rise from 180 million people to 265 million people. This prediction was not far from the truth because over 500 million people in the Sub-Saharan Africa are living below the poverty line (World Bank Group, 2016). Owing to this, church and other faith-based organization are concerned by the levels of poverty and economic disparities emanating from the various economic models adopted by governments (Yurdakul & Atik, 2016). Poverty is lack of fundamental necessities and needs including services such as housing, clothing, healthcare, food, education and job opportunities.

According to Theuri (2015), poverty could be termed as the state of scarcity of basic items that are important for dignified living which include spiritual, moral, intellectual, material and economic needs among others. To reduce poverty levels, there is need for unified and merged programs.

In many states, development has been championed without the church being considered as an alternative actor. Owing to this, many states efficacy in addressing grassroots problems has remained limited leaving the citizenry vulnerable to effects of underdevelopment. The development vacuum at the grassroots has, therefore, been partially filled by other non-state actors such as churches, Non-Governmental Organizations and Community Based Organizations. States that incorporate churches and other development or community development actors experience faster growth than countries that do it alone. The Church is at the grassroots level, thus, it can be best placed to champion socio-economic development of the community. Since the church promises abundant life and, in many communities, acts as basis for wholesome life, therefore, it remains the primary institution for heralding hopeful development. The church participates in the community and national development activities through mobilization of its membership (Kioko, 2020).

In the contemporary society, the Church is attracting international attention among actors who seek to leverage on the Church's wealth of social capital to advance the development agenda. Among these actors are academicians who over time have explored the theme of the church in development. A cursory review reveals that several works have been focused on the church and development in various contexts. However, one of the challenges is the clear role of the church in socio-economic development especially to the poor communities. This has led to the reduction of her capacity to participate fully in socio-economic activities geared towards development of the community. Though studies have been carried out in various parts of the world and intervention measures undertaken as concerns the role of the church in socio-economic development, there has not been an attempt to mainstream scholarly voices on this issue so as to bring out a corporate picture of the church in development. Owing to this, studies have remained contextual and scattered meaning that the claim that the church is a potential agent in development can be challenged by states and other quarters where such has not been experienced. There is, therefore, need to sculpture an overall portrait of the church in so far as community development is concerned. The importance of such an undertaking is that it foregrounds the church's role in development both at local and global perspectives. The task of this paper therefore, is to examine the role of the church in socio-economic development of the rural poor in the Sub-Saharan Africa. This is done through a review of nine selected research papers that directly address the church in development but from various contexts. Specifically, the paper aims to examine the impacts of church development initiatives in improving lives in poor communities and to analyze knowledge gaps of church-driven socio-economic development as espoused by these scholars as well as give future research directions.

Literature review

Empirical review

A perusal of the nine journal articles reviewed, reveals that there are deep areas of studies that are still un-researched and constitute grounds for further research. All the researchers established that though the church has a crucial role to play in community socio-economic development, its role has not been completely explored and thus, it's still unknown empirically. Ontita (2012) in his study on the role of the local church in Nyamira on livelihood construction, acknowledged that the church occupies a significant place in the lives of villagers in Nyamira yet there lack empirical studies on the contribution their participation in church makes to their livelihood. Bompani and Smith (2013) similarly pointed out in their study on the Catholic church and rural development in Kenya, that there is limited empirical understanding on the role that churches have played in promoting new types of agricultural technologies, including precursors of biotechnologies. In addition, Hirst (2017) was concerned with the role of clergy in areas that were facing social economic deprivation. Hirst was concerned that clergy contribute to the health and well-being of individuals, households and communities through their pastoral role yet what they offer and its effectiveness is not assessed quantitatively. He also observed that in the most deprived areas of England clergy are rare while less deprived areas have better access to clergy though this information is scantily documented in existing literature. Consequently, little impact was recorded with regard to the socio-economic development. As a result, he recommends further research to identify pathways for market forces that might influence clergy deployments and draw them towards deprived areas. He also recommends a comparative analysis of denominational and faith groups in Britain.

Magezi's (2017) research in a context of extreme poverty, was concerned with how church-driven development approach can be revitalized to champion community development at the grassroots level. He observed that the role of churches in community development has not been utterly explored. In addition, inadequate attention has been given to churches in social- scientific analysis and there is little or no global empirical studies on the work of churches in community development. Empirical research that has been conducted is also localized to a few communities, one country or very few countries in a continent. The research revealed that the church was involved in holistic development approach which means that it did not focus on one single thing alone. This exhibited that the church is effective in playing both spiritual and social economic development roles. Based on this the study recommends a further longitudinal examination of the churches' work in development to provide additional acumens on how development is done through churches in the communities.

Additionally, Ndegwa et al. (2018) while examining the role of the Church in socio-economic empowerment of communities observed that scholarly attention has not been focused on the role of Holy Christian Israel Church on development, hence, little research has been conducted on the same. The role of indigenous churches on development has received little scholarly attention compared to that of mega churches. Though the authors do not overtly recommend any areas of further research, exploration of the effects of indigenous churches ideology in underdeveloped communities could be a fertile ground for future research. Moreover, Beukes (2019) in his study on leveraging social capital of the church for development observed that the area of church and development has extensive publications.

However, there are glaring knowledge gaps on the significant recognition of churches as crucial role-players, hence many publications overlook the social capital of congregations. The whole concept of social capital needs to be christened for applicability in church championed developments.

Furthermore, the study by Kioko (2020) while highlighting church's role in development with evidence from Redeemed Gospel Church in Makueni attributed the limited development to resource limitations. The research, however, overlooked other structural dimensions that could contribute to the less efficacy in grassroots development. It can be deduced from the paper that the whole field of the relationship between RGC and leadership in development should be explored. Based on this, it would be interesting to explore how church governance potentialities can be harnessed for community development. Isiani et al. (2021) were also concerned with the role of church in social-economic transformations in Nigeria and their study also revealed that the social ostracism suffered by native pioneers of Western education in Onitsha Province is hardly known in scholarship.

The reviewed papers also divulge a gap in the theoretical frameworks. Most of the articles were not guided by specific theories. Six studies were informed by social theories but none of the articles overtly shared a theory. Some of the researchers engaged with the respondents and the context to authentically study and represent lived experiences and views. Though there is richness in diversity, application of existing theories in a synchronized manner and authentic engagement with respondents can enrich knowledge and inform practice.

In addition, reviewed articles reveal gaps in the methodology used in the studies. Seven of the studies were based on qualitative, and two blend qualitative and quantitative designs. No quantitative study was encountered. Most studies were based on ethnographic research and tools which were applied into a single church or localities. They presented research questions to guide the process, present and test hypothesis. Though qualitative designs are best suited to study social phenomenon, it can be interesting to have more quantitative studies. Studies can cut across rural and urban mega churches, Pentecostals and African indigenous churches among other categories so as to diversify and enrich knowledge.

Methodology

The task involved a review of journal papers around the topic of church and development. To come up with journals for review, this systematic review paper relied on empirical studies for data and for conclusions of the study. The study relied on key data bases for reliable publications on church and development as the main key words. The main data bases used for this study are research gate, jstor.org, Wiley online, Sage publications, Africa journal online, and Taylor and Francis. Since most of the journals were in e-data bases, literature search was conducted using key words such as church, development, grassroots, empowerment and developing countries. Related words or phrases namely religious organizations, faith-based organizations, social-economic development, community, society, sub-Sahara Africa, East Africa and Kenya were also searched. The search was narrowed down to all journals published in the last fifteen years i.e., 2006 to 2021. Total hits in key databases after narrowed search were 53 journals with the

key or related words, 36 of which were purposively excluded after the abstract review because they were not reported in English. Twenty-seven journals were included after the title and abstract. The 27 journals were further scrutinized, and 18 journals were systematically excluded because they were either reports, thesis or review papers. Nine journals were purposely included for the study because they met the criterion. It would be expected that such a study would not encounter major limitations. Although this is consistent with all desktop research, however, a few limitations were encountered. For example, many journals were titled “church and development”, but the content did not reflect church and development. This limitation was overcome by narrowing down on search categories and a deep scrutiny of the content of the journals. A second limitation was that most articles did not have open access policy. This would have seriously compromised on the richness of data required. However, the challenge was overcome by searching across databases. Some papers restricted in one database were openly accessible in other databases.

Results and Discussion

Church’s untapped Potential for Development

Studies conducted by Ontita (2012) and Kioko (2020) reveal that the church is a key partner in development however, much of its potential remains untapped. Ontita (2012) especially studied the role of the local church in Nyamira on construction of livelihood and acknowledged that the church occupies a significant place in the lives of villagers in Nyamira. However, the church’s potential is underutilized and thus the need to re-energize and immerse itself in people’s struggles to improve their quality of life. Kioko (2020) also agonizes in his study on the role of the church in social-economic development of the community that despite the church having a direct policy in development its potential is untapped because leadership strategies are in want. More to that he observes that development actors are lacking and there is so much untapped potential, thus, poverty is still prevalent in Makueni. The study reveals that Redeemed Gospel Church (RGC) has three hundred (300) churches in Makueni County but only two of its key churches have performed commendably in socio-economic development. Kioko (2020) agonizes if the other 298 churches can do the same then RGC’s community development initiatives would be visible.

Ontita (2012) argues that the church should resonate with the people’s needs for information, leisure activities and exercise, social support, relationships management in their everyday lives and participate more forcefully in mission to neighboring community members. In this regard, the church is in a passive position owing to the central place given to the church by the villagers, yet it has not made significant social-economic development. The church’s potential is underutilized and thus, it needs to re-energize and immerse itself in peoples struggles to improve their way of life. In addition, Kioko’s (2020) study seems to blame the church for all the problems in Makueni County an indicator that the church’s potential for development is untapped. Owing to this, the study seems to assume that the church is a flawless institution and overlooks the fact that church politics and corruption hinder the church’s potentialities in community development initiatives.

Peoples' Participation in Development

The church as a key social institution, is part of the community and is well positioned to authentically contribute in improving the status of its members and the community. Subsequently, development is about people; it must be people centered as evidenced by Magezi's (2017) study on making community development at grassroots a reality. In Magezi's (2017) study, people were engaged in their context to understand and interpret issues, generate knowledge and enhance practice; something that helped churches and other religious organizations to view each other as development partners and not doctrinal antagonists, and thus, come together to attend to the development needs of base communities. In addition, findings of Ontita's (2012) study on the role of the local church in Nyamira on construction of livelihood reveal that the villagers in Nyamira are taken as partners in development. They are involved in construction of churches and schools as well as visiting the sick and needy. This is not the situation in most cases as poor communities expect development to be initiated and implemented by external forces. Equally, Beukes (2019) study demonstrates that utilizing social capital, and involvement, of the people at the grassroots is paramount for any social-economic development initiatives to take place. Most scholars argue that social capital is a communal endeavor since the entirety of the efforts of people that participate in any form of the social network to build social capital upshots in the communal good or mutual benefit, even for those who did not participate. The study reveals that a bottom-up and top-down approach allowed farmworkers and congregations to co-own community projects to bring in their indigenous knowledge for effective development initiatives.

These results on people's participation in development are a good indicator that the church has direct influence on the community since churches are established within communities, are part of it and are accessible. It's worth noting that success in spiritual and socio-economic development varies depending on how churches leverage on connections with their members, non-members and grassroots networks in the wider community, something that is evident in all the articles that were reviewed. Positioning, presence and activities of the church in communities demonstrate its importance as a development actor. The church has a captive audience because many people frequent it. It is, therefore, the best positioned institution to rally people in development. Active involvement of the church with people enables it to identify needs and possible solutions which enhance ownership and impact development initiatives of members and communities. However, though Beukes (2019) does an excellent job in journeying through a critical case study, the study fails to either point out the authentic nature of the concept of church in this community that may fail to be as effective in other areas. Using the researchers own words, "religion also has the power to divide" then it becomes difficult to hold a watertight argument on the role of the church social capital in community development.

Doctrine and Development

The church's doctrine can either complement and motivate or impede development. Studies by Ndegwa et al. (2018), Magezi (2017) and Yurdakul and Atik (2016) have outlined the interrelationship between doctrine and development. Ndegwa's et al. (2018) observes that the role and influences of the church as a development actor are linked to its theological and doctrinal positions. Therefore, he demonstrates that there is a relationship between doctrine (dubious theology) and development, anti-development, ant-modernism, misconception, lack of training, and lack of capacity in the Christian Holy Israel Church (CHIC).

CHIC had presence in its locality but there was no noticeable impact of the church on the community owing to the fact that no such projects initiated by the sampled church were found on the ground. The church appeared to be focused more on spiritual matters and did not have any project aimed at socio-economic development of its members and the community. In addition, money collected from congregants of the sampled church was not used for economic projects for its members or members of the community since it was mainly used to pay their leaders. Moreover, its capacity to provide such development assistance for its members remained questionable. Similarly, Magezi's (2017) research in a context of extreme poverty also revealed that churches' reflexivity in religious and ideological positions lead to uncoordinated development initiatives and limited capacity to organize themselves to work together, and thus, hinder the churches' potential contribution to effective community development. Additionally, it is also evident in the study by Yurdakul and Atik (2016) that religion has been important for the poor as they react to the consumer culture. In spite of engraining modernization and secularization in Turkey, as well as the prominence of largely secular mainstream media in the lives of the poor, it is at once inquisitive and informative how religion gives insight regarding the power of community and political grassroots institutions against the mainstream discourses that scholars generally acknowledge.

Though the study by Ndegwa et al. (2018) has outlined the interrelationship between doctrine and development, the research lacks the fertilization of a theory; the analysis is left weak. The study would have been more useful if it based the phenomena under study on a development or a religious theory e.g., phenomenological approach. In addition, the church's anti-modern stance on matters such as education, healthcare and lack of formal training of its ministers, inevitably made it find no basis for investing in such development programs for its members and the community. Moreover, its capacity to provide such development assistance for its members is in question. Magezi's (2017) study also outlines that harnessing churches' potential in communities would enable church stakeholders and congregations to focus on community needs leading to church-driven community development initiatives among many poor African communities. However, the explanation appears idealistic since it is difficult to harmonize theological ideologies and church traditions in one project in a short period. This approach overlooks other factors in development e.g., gender dimensions.

These two studies reveal that when churches pursue their doctrinal positions with their members and in communities without consideration of other churches' needs in the community, development is reduplicated and uncoordinated. When churches remain adamantly in ideological and religious silos, the result is multiple uncoordinated development initiatives and duplication of efforts since churches target the same community. Although Churches are at liberty to pursue and interpret their positions, there should be integration with socio-economic development needs of their members and the community. Coordination among churches can help in tapping churches' immense potential for effective community development. While it is true as indicated by Yurdakul and Atik (2016) in their study that the political-religious influence on market resistance cannot be underestimated, these will be shaped by how the resistance narrative is politically and religiously shaped and what efforts are being used to control and sustain the narrative. This is supported by further findings in the paper that it remains some low-income consumers interpret religion in such a way that it leads to non-resistance and acceptance behavior, while other interpretations lead to resistance.

Church Development in Political Contexts

The church like any other institution operates in a political environment and it pursues its goals within a political setting governed by political ideologies and leadership. It is not possible for the church to overlook the political influence and role in their decision making and implementation of projects. In the study by Bompani and Smith (2013), the Catholic Church successfully introduced banana tissues culture farming despite the contested and political discourse around biotechnology. Findings from the study indicate that the church negotiated its own ethical and theological system and thus, demonstrates that the church is not only entirely subjected to the political will and power but also to institutional intuition as a community influencer. It's also worth noting that since the church is not immune from political opposition in its pursuit for development, it needs to position itself in such a manner that nothing will hinder its developmental endeavors. The church remains an important partner with the state in initiating social and economic development and though the two have different functions, they complement each other rather than compete with each other. The church is given its mandate by God while the government draws its mandate from the people.

Why the Church Fails in Development

Like any other institution, the church can fail in its mandate to mediate abundant life to communities. It was evident from the reviewed studies that although the church is an important development actor, a number of factors constrain its performance. Firstly, if a church is only skewed towards spiritual matters neglecting social economic development then it is bound to fail. This was evident in the study by Ndegwa et al. (2018) where the Christian Holy Israeli Church was only concerned with spiritual matters and had no project aimed at empowering its members. This resulted in discontent among its members and contempt in the community. A study by Kioko (2020) in the Redeemed Gospel Church noted that the church spread the gospel and established three hundred (300) churches but it was only two (2) churches that had meaningful development impact on the community. The study blamed the church's overconcentration on its internal operations which resulted in its failure to improve the lives of its poor members and community. When the church loses its balance between its spiritual concerns and livelihood of its members, it results in operating in poor contexts. Therefore, there is need to integrate the church's spiritual business with the pursuit for a holistic development of members and the community.

Secondly, inadequate capacities and lack of commitment among church leadership hinders the church from initiating and implementing development initiatives. Ontita's (2012) study based on the intersection of the church and livelihoods revealed that members participated actively in church activities but struggled to make a living. Additionally, Ndegwa et al. (2021) the engrossment of the church on spreading the gospel at the expense of developing its members economically. In his particular case study, it was noted that money collected from congregants of the sampled church was not used for economic projects for its members or members of the community; it was mainly used to pay their leaders. What comes out from these two studies is that the church can fail in development due to lack of capacity among its members and leaders.

This trend can be observed in Kenya where churches have proliferated but many of their leaders and members have not in equal been empowered with capacity for initiating sustainable development projects. Capacity development should be a priority for effective leadership and development.

Thirdly, inadequate resources constrain effective development initiatives by the church. Consequently, Hirst (2017) reveals that clergy who offer pastoral care infrequent the most deprived areas due to low income and lack of material resources. He also observes that although there is common agreement across theological traditions and religious teaching for a “partiality to the poor”, religious commitment to the poor and socially marginalized is lacking limiting the capability of clergy to respond pastorally and act politically on their behalf. Kioko (2020) study among the redeemed Gospel Church indicated that limitation in resources contributed to the failure of the church to initiate development projects in Makueni county. Magezi (2017) also observed that churches remained poor partners in development because of over-reliance on funding by development partners. However, it is worth noting that although some churches like the Catholic Church have development initiatives in many parts of the world, many churches have resources constrains as they prioritize internal over external commitments. Therefore, partnerships and prudent allocation of own resources can help reduce this resource gap and channel it to priority development initiatives.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This review has presented the church as a favored institution in socio-economic development because of its religious and moral stand points. It is based on nine studies conducted in varying context. This review paper reveals that the church is involved in development initiatives that improve lives in poor communities in sub-Sahara Africa albeit with varying focus and impacts. It also reveals and discusses factors internal and external to the church that determine success or failure of the church in spiritual and socio-economic development of its members and their communities. In addition, the paper reveals that there is paucity of studies especially quantitative on the subject at various levels and analyzes knowledge gaps. While acknowledging various theological standpoints harbored by churches, the paper recommends that to be effective in development, churches have to work together to collaborate and complement each other in socio-economic development initiatives.

While most studies were concentrated on researching particular contexts, it can be noted that the application of the term “church” in the said studies remained vaguely defined. Therefore, a study of the universal church – as the *ecclesia* remains a huge gap. The study therefore, recommends that a synchronic approach to church and development be conducted. Such a study would mainstream theories, concepts and designs that would guide researchers who are more interested in the church as universal and not local or particularized churches.

Additionally, this review highlighted a number of gaps in the studies that can inform future studies to contribute to knowledge and practice of church in development. In order to formulate a universal church’s approach to development, deliberate efforts are required to undertake quality studies that go beyond local churches to embrace a developmental framework for the universal church. Studies should address methodological and theoretical gaps to inform design as well as enhance theory and practice of the role of the church in socio-economic development. In

addition, more mainstreaming of existing studies is required in order to inform and enrich theory and practice of the universal church in socio-economic development.

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