

CHURCH AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The issue of the Church's role in development is a thorny one. Not only is the concept of development controversial, but also the fact of and the way in which the Church is involved raise many questions. In this article the aforementioned is discussed in view of the special characteristics prevailing in Kenya. An attempt is made to describe the unique role of the Church - yet not a disengaged one.

1. Introduction

I was part of a group of theologians who went to Kenya in order to learn more about our own future in Africa. As I was for the past few years involved in a research programme on 'The influence of religion on development', I would like to reflect on my observations and experiences in the area of the churches and development. I may also refer to examples from other African countries, specifically Zimbabwe and Zambia, which I subsequently visited.

A number of observations can be stated at the outset. First: in Kenya, as elsewhere in Africa, the need for 'development' is great. Secondly, we were impressed by much that is happening, on a formal and informal level, in terms of 'development'. The exception here is Zambia, where the situation is clearly deteriorating without obvious checks. It became clear, in the third instance, that the African state is turning more and more to the churches and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to carry the brunt of community developmental task. Fourthly, the individual churches increasingly seem to realise that they can do very little on their own. Fifthly, I was glad to discern a common search for a better understanding of the dynamics of development, and a serious rethinking of the contribution the church could and should make in the field of development.

2. How great is the need for development?

If we for the time being at least take the socio-economic situation of the population as an indication of the need for development in a country, it is easy to demonstrate that Kenya - and for that matter most of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa - is in great need of such. Because of a lack of space I refer only to Kenya.

To economists the two main areas of concern seem to be (a) the high rate of population growth, which is far outstripping the growth of the economy, and (b) the balance of payments problem.

The official population growth rate for 1986 was 4,3%! It 'boasted' a birth rate of 53,9 per 1 000 during the years 1980-1985, compared to Zimbabwe's (also high) birth rate of 42,5. It must be one of the highest of any country in the world. No wonder the death rate is also very high at 13,6 per 1 000. This can be taken as an indication of low socio-economic standards, but also as one of the main causes for the unacceptable situation.

The country has a huge and growing deficit in the balance of payments. Its imports exceed exports by some US\$700 per year (1987,1988). On the one hand this is the result of deteriorating terms of trade, with high prices for petroleum and other imports and generally low world prices for Kenya's commodities. On the other hand it is caused by internal problems, many of them to be blamed on the government's inability to manage the economy.

3. But what is 'development'?

Up to now I have used the term 'development' in an imprecise way as if it is (only) an economic matter. This is indeed what the majority of people mean when they use the term. We have however come to realise that it is no longer possible to speak in a naive way - as maybe in the 1950s - about 'development', as if everybody understands what is meant and agrees on what should be meant by the term. The fact is that already since the inception of the 'development era' there were at least two main philosophical schools involved in the theorising about development.

The one way of thinking was that which stressed modernisation or economic growth, while the other viewed dependency and liberation as the issues. Not that these two emphases are really mutually exclusive (we will come back to that), but it is important to keep this distinction in mind.

Nürnbergger (1978:222) gives a thumbnail description of the thought underlying the first model:

The basic assumption is that history moves in one direction towards ever greater achievement and fulfillment. Some societies and especially some groups of people within societies are far advanced on this common road, others have been left behind. The advanced are so far ahead because they have developed a rational outlook on life, a scientific and technical mentality, new ways for utilisation of available resources, sophisticated and powerful means of production, smooth and fast channels of trade and communication, efficient administrative and financial institutions and the like. Their planned utilisation of scientific research and technological innovation and their successful investment of the accumulating capital for productive ends has led to a rapid growth of their economic capacity, standards of living, power and influence. The other have been left behind on this road to success. Some have not even made up their mind to start walking yet. They have a mentality or

culture which is directed towards communal sharing and the enjoyment of fellowship rather than to individual achievement, towards supernatural powers rather than to an empirical and utilitarian view of nature, towards an ever valid past rather than towards a future which needs to be conquered. Their techniques are simple, their distribution practices irrational, their institutions archaic and untrustworthy, their administration corrupt and inefficient, their communications network blocked by outdated cultural patterns.

To remedy this situation, this model suggests that our main task is to make the economy of the backward societies grow fast by offering strong material incentives for achievement, etc ... - in short, by 'modernising' the whole setup from top to toe. Because of their superior knowledge and experience, the advanced should help the backward on this ladder of progress through educational, technological and scientific aid, and through the investment of some of their spare capital in the backward economy so that it gets going in the direction of growth ...

It is clear that the important words are 'growth', 'achievement', 'incentives', 'modernisation', 'progress', 'production', 'science', and 'aid'. Not for one moment is the 'success' of the 'developed' societies questioned. It goes without saying that it is the Western mentality or culture, the Western way of ordering society and doing things, which is regarded as the ideal, the goal towards which history is going. 'Civilization' is synonymous with Western culture. The others are 'primitive'. There rests an almost sacred responsibility on the West to 'develop' the 'un(der) developed' societies, i e, those who stayed behind on the road to the future. The criteria for success tend to be material, and the process of development - once the mentioned mental blocks are removed - is evolutionary and it is also very clear that this approach was prevalent in the last years of the 'colonial era'. The British colonial government was 'developing' Kenya (and its other colonies in Southern Africa) along these lines. A visitor to the country cannot but be amazed at the well developed infrastructure of roads, railways and airfields, as well as the availability of electricity, communications, and water reticulation systems. One cannot help but notice how much of the amenities on the wildlife reserves and hotels of the tourist of these were already in place at the time of independence. (By the way, one of the most serious observations of the present-day visitor is the extent to which these 'developments' are falling into disrepair!)

In time - we cannot describe the whole shift here - development thinking and practise shifted away from the crude capitalistic development model to a new integral view whereby development was related to the totality of human needs, values and standards. The emphasis shifted from the changes of the circumstances to human changes.

The second model was at once more contextual and also sensitive to the community.

It was especially in Latin America that the paradigm shift took place. Educationists, sociologists, theologians and other analysts of the development process came - by way of Neo-Marxist social analysis - to the conclusion that what they were in fact

witnessing was 'the development of under development'! The traditional kind of development was in effect acting mainly to the benefit of the already 'developed'. Even where aid led to economic growth in terms of gross national product (GNP), closer scrutiny revealed that the poor didn't really benefit, but that the elite of the country walked away with the profits. It was therefore argued that the basic change necessary was one of relationships.

Underdevelopment was considered to be in good measure rooted in the exploitation and domination of those in the 'periphery' (the South, or Third World) of our world-system by the powerful people of the 'core' (the North, or West). To continue the development process without restructuring these relationships would amount to a reinforcement of the *status quo* of domination and dependency. Not modernisation but a total transformation is necessary, a liberation from the system which benefits the strong to the detriment of the weak. No evolutionary process - such as is envisaged in development - will succeed to bring this new order, but a revolution, an overturning of the old.

For a summary description of the second - the liberation or dependency model - we may again turn to Nürnberger (1978:223):

The liberation model says: the poor are the victims of oppression and exploitation. Here the basic assumption is that, if some are richer than others, it simply means that they have taken more than their share from the common pot. During the colonial era the rich societies have plundered the world of its wealth, built their industrial system with the spoil, entrenched themselves firmly on the world markets and, from this position of economic, political and military strength, continue to tap from the poorer societies whatever wealth these may manage to generate. The problem, then, is the unequal distribution of wealth and power, the abuse of their greater leverage by the privileged for their own selfish ends, the dependency of the poor on the rich. Far from helping the poor to get out of their misery, the continued contact between such unequal partners, including the so-called 'development aid', can only worsen their position. That is why the poor should sever ties with the rich and start to develop on their own lines, using their own resources; the only way to such freedom is to overthrow the *status quo* by violent revolution.

Where the classic development model emphasised economic issues, the liberation model tended to relate everything to the question of power, i e, politics. It goes without saying that this is the kind of thinking that was *en vogue* in the liberation struggle against the colonial masters - in Kenya, in Zambia and Zimbabwe. The wrongs done by the politically powerful had to be redressed. This could only be done when the power rested in the hands of the (representatives of the) people. This was indeed attained at independence.

Although the concept of liberation is basically political, this process from the beginning involved more than a mere change in structures or a social revolution with the view to a better society. Durand (1988:27) says:

It is rather a permanent cultural revolution in which people take upon themselves the responsibility for the process of history.

All aspects of the human existence are involved - certainly also the religious. Gutierrez and other liberation theologians view the liberation process as part of God's salvific actions in which the universal rule of Christ is made manifest. It is therefore consistent with their thinking that these theologians call upon the church to identify itself with the struggle of the oppressed and the exploited for liberation and a just society (*ibid*:27).

The arguments of the critics of 'development' have too much truth in them to be dismissed summarily. Seen against the dismal record of the 'development decades' in the Third World, and the deepening gulf between rich and poor, not only in global terms, but also within individual economies, the liberation approach makes sense.

Unfortunately, however, the 'liberation' programme has nowhere resulted in really better living conditions for the people. It didn't happen in Latin America, nor did it happen in the countries that we are using as examples. For the first few years the declining economy could be blamed on the Colonial Administration. But after a few decades of independence this kind of rhetoric is beginning to sound hollow in the ears of those who are suffering.

There has to be a better way, one which builds on the best in the previous models, but avoids the pitfalls of oversimplification. Could the churches play a role in this?

4. The churches and development

Church leaders are children of their time. They tend to make the same kind of mistakes, even if they are somewhat wiser and more cautious than others, because of their orientation to the traditions of their faith. In as far as the stated intention of the developmentalists was the upliftment of the poor, the sensitive church leaders welcomed it and called on the church and all governments to support these efforts. Pope Paul VI even said: 'Development is the new name for peace'!

In much the same way the church leaders later on also came to the conclusion that the liberationists were correct in the unmasking of the greed and the lust for power inherent in much of what went through as 'development aid'. The church also came to the insight that the capitalistic basis of development needed to be criticised. Liberation Theology became a powerful new way of understanding the role of the church in society. The church saw itself as called to truly side with the poor and to be the champion of justice and peace in society.

If this tendency could be seen internationally, it can also be illustrated from the situation in Kenya¹. Dr Agnes Chepkwony, a Kenyan historian interested in development studies, made perceptive remarks in a paper she read during our symposium in Nairobi, from which I here draw a number of insights.

1. See A Chepkwony in this issue: *Development involvement of the Churches in Eastern and Southern Africa*.

Chepkwony acknowledges the well-known fact that 'it was the missionary church that was the main carrier of what we today term as social services'. Already during the colonial times the missions became heavily involved in the creation and further development of not only an educational and health system, but it even laid the foundations for commercial farming. The churches pioneered these services in a time when the colonial governments were primarily interested in the settlement and prospering of the European settlers. In the process, however, the church also imparted new values that went further than just the acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the planting of the church.

Yet it should be clearly stated that even with combined efforts of the church and the state in socio-economic development the economy remained weak and dualistic in nature.

The church represented the people at grassroots in its most organised form, but on the other hand worked with the state in a set-up which was actually responsible for the situation of dependency in international relations.

To this should be added the ideological choices that were at the time of the freedom struggle forced on the young governments. The liberation movements accepted aid from any quarter, but it was mostly the Marxist countries which supported their armed struggle. The church - at this time largely under non-African leadership and therefore part of the cold war mentality - was divided on the issue. Many missionaries in East Africa came from China, where they were expelled by the communist regime. They were afraid of the nationalist movement, thinking that it would become communist. They would prefer a more Western type solution. On the other hand, many church members had sympathy with the struggle, and was grateful for the support given by the Marxists. These issues would in the end have important bearings on the relation of the church to the state in the post-independence era.

The new governments accepted the ideal of the welfare state. Accordingly, the state felt responsible to be the sole agent for the development of the country. The fact, however, was that they were generally too weak to succeed in this. Those that opted for socialist development nationalised the economy and centered the economic enterprise on a civil service that was unable to stimulate growth. The others who chose a more capitalist direction found the state being reduced to a role only in the public sector, while private enterprise and private capital took over the management and control of the economy. Only Kenya and Zimbabwe inherited a reasonably modern economy. Zimbabwe was the only with a heavy industrial sector.

The development ideology was that which we already described as modernisation. Neither people nor the environment did really matter. It was a technical approach, and the direction was that of the industrialised world. Statistical growth was the goal. Traditional recourses and abilities were not honoured.

What was the role of the church during this time?

Although there were instances where the church was critical of the political ideology of the state, '... on the whole, the church endorsed government development policies, and formulated and implemented their development interventions within the

definition of development propagated by the UN. The participation of the church has been uncritical', says Chepkwony.

By the time of the third development decade (the 1980s) the worsening economic situation of the African countries led to the appearance of at least two new issues.

The first was the tension that developed between the church and the state on political issues.

The second was the exit of governments from the development arena. Thus there was the necessity of another kind of agency to take the lead, the so-called NGOs. In the process, the church was also seen and classified as an NGO. Not only governments, but even Western churches and relief organisations started to support and boost the social arm of the churches. What it amounted to was the professionalisation of the church, and caused a real threat to the fundamental identity and agenda of the church. The integrity of the church was at stake. Very few churches are ready to deal with this shift.

We shall return to these two challenges in the last section.

5. Some other thinking on church and development in Kenya

The National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) is an active and broad fellowship of churches acting as stimulant to and servant of the member churches. It functions on a wide front. In 1987 the NCCCK published a booklet *'In as much'. A survey of the life and work of the NCCCK*. From this publication it is clear that the social and developmental programmes are actually receiving the priority attention in this organisation. Among the stated functions of the NCCCK, according to its Constitution, are the following :

- * Evangelistic endeavour shall take a holistic approach, seeking to balance proclamation of the word and the creation of a just, sustainable society.
- * To express the common concern of the member bodies in the service of human need.
- * To promote the study and investigation of all problems relating to the effective extension of the Kingdom of God, including matters concerning economic, social and political issues.
- * To help form an enlightened Christian public opinion on all issues affecting the spiritual, moral and physical welfare of the peoples of the country.
- * It encourages self-reliance and enables people to obtain a solid foundation on which to build their lives.

In describing its involvement issues, the brochure says:

The NCCCK was initially involved in the early 1960s, along with the Government in semi-arid Northern Kenya to provide relief for people left destitute by drought, floods, and shift (bandits) wars. After a time, the Council rechanneled its energies into efforts aimed at helping the affected

people become self-reliant in meeting their needs. The NCKK switched its role from relief provider to rural development facilitator.

They point to large numbers of programmes dealing with clean water supply, agricultural schemes, soil conservation and education in the rural areas. But they also have a programme for 'urban community improvement' where the disadvantaged are assisted in their own housing and small industrial projects. Another important committee gives attention to 'family life and welfare' programmes where also the thorny problem of family planning is tackled.

The NCKK is obviously trying to be holistic in its developmental work. As such it is probably leading the field among the NGOs of Kenya. But if this was the only dimension of their involvement, the NCKK is basically still operating within the 'charity paradigm', and would there still be an important dimension missing. That is why it is good news when the then General Secretary of the NCKK, the Reverend Samuel Kobia, in a publication edited by Dr Jesse Mugambi writes (Kobia 1989:14):

In the early work of the church, mission encompassed almost everything that the church did - evangelization, formal education, healthwork, social work, agriculture and industrial work. That approach was interrupted in the early 1960s in the wake of development as a discipline and profession. We need to revisit the earlier concept and method of mission work. The concept of life or, better still, fullness of life will best help us to describe the mission of the Church. It is in search of fullness of life for everybody that the question of justice and sustainability come in.

Herein lies the specific Christian contribution, I think, which goes beyond the previous developmental models.

In another contribution in the same book edited by Mugambi, Dr Francis Gichia (1989:96-101) writes in the same vein about the 'Christian liberation praxis' which, for him, includes four dimensions:

* 'Conscientization' is the process of teaching through which the Christians are led to ask questions, become aware of their problems, and to take the first steps towards improving their society. This would even lead them to political involvement. Gichia quotes a very interesting speech of the late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta where he called on the churches to show the way:

The church is the conscience of society and today society needs a conscience. Do not be afraid to speak. If we go wrong and you keep quiet, one day you may have to answer for our mistakes.

* 'Development' is not just a matter of reducing poverty and eliminating hunger. It is a question, rather, of building a world where everyone, no matter what his social status, can have a full human life, freed from servitude imposed on him or her by other men, a world where freedom is not an empty word.

* 'Reconciliation': Since an essential aspect of the Christian community is that of being a sign of peace and reconciliation, Christians should first seek to promote these values in their own communities and then in the wider society.

* 'Evangelization': All the injustices in society, the abuse of power and other evils emanate from sin which resides in the heart of man. It is therefore only from a new heart that a new world can be born.

This seems to be the Christian answer to the socio-economic crisis not only in Kenya, but also elsewhere.

6. Two important issues

We return to the two issues which were touched on in the paper of Dr Chepkwony, namely (a) the relation of the church to the state, and (b) the church's unique identity in the development field.

When development is understood by the church as something holistic, involving the total well-being of people, and a society that is free from injustice, then it is a thoroughly political matter. Tension with the political powers is inevitable. What, then, should be the relationship between the church and the state? Is it possible to work hand in hand for the well-being of the whole population?

Dr Chepkwony is especially dissatisfied with the fact that the churches, she says, who are desperately trying to move beyond relief to positive development projects find that natural and man-made disasters time and again throw them back to the role of stopping the gaps.

For how long shall the church do relief in war zones?

It is time that the church moved decisively beyond its present borders of operation which are micro-projects to policy level and large scale development. It should actively become a peace broker and reconciler. Or else whatever effort it makes in development stands to be destroyed. By pursuing peace the church does not need to abandon development activities, but it has to recognise the futility of doing relief year in and year out, constructing bridges and clinics just to be destroyed.

This is related to the second issue: what is the church? In what form is the church involved in development? Is the church willing to be classified as a NGO, a nongovernmental organisation, or is it in essence something quite different? The answer will link up with the understanding the church has of the goal and process of development: is it compatible with any other developmental philosophy? The church adds a spiritual heart to all its involvement, and that makes it different from other secular and humanistic models.

The crux of the matter will be the church's commitment to its unique contribution, and the resulting fruits of its involvement in development.

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