

Agro-Enterprises Program and Poverty Reduction: A Church Based Approach

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ABSTRACT—The reality of poverty upon humanity is present and visible all around. Poverty is no respecter of religious creed, ideology or lack of it. Since religious people are humans, they are subject to the scourge of poverty and its attendant discomforts. Reactions to poverty by different religions have ranged from acceptance, accommodation, and resignation to efforts to fight and banish it. Writing from a Christian worldview, this paper seeks to study efforts made by some Christian religious bodies to reduce poverty through agro-enterprises among their members primarily and the general public. It tries to establish a connection between agriculture and poverty reduction using a faith based approach. Biblical warrants for such initiatives will be examined in order to emphasize the pertinence of the venture. Recommendations are made for Christian organizations, churches especially, to consider such initiatives.

Keywords: agro-enterprises, poverty, faith-based, hunger, income.

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I. Introduction

The strength of any nation is determined by how it cares for the weak and poor among it. John F. Kennedy (1961) said: "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich" Each society or nation has a moral obligation to ensure the attainment of a fairly comfortable livelihood for its people. Our common humanness further obligates us to do something concrete and positive in the alleviation of the sufferings of the poor everywhere. Chibuye (2008, p.1) cites this quotation by Mahatma Gandhi that says; "Whenever you are in doubt, apply the following test: recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to them."

Poverty reduction, especially in poor and developing nations, has been a major concern to different segments of the society. Efforts and strategies have been put in place to help many come out of its trap. Seeing it as a physical scourge that has a spiritual dimension (Domeris, 1986 pp 57-56), different faith organizations have taken an active interest in empowering individuals both within and outside of their fold to come out of poverty. This paper examines how Christian organizations have taken an active part in poverty reduction by getting actively involved in agricultural and agric-related initiatives. Because of space constraints, this paper will present some of the efforts of only four (4) Christian organizations as illustrations. However, the paper will first of all make some conceptual clarifications of the subject under consideration.

II. The Scourge of Poverty on Humanity

Generally, poverty is seen as the state of being poor or deficient in money or means of subsistence. It is a situation where people live in less human conditions; conditions that do not bestow human dignity. It is a lack of essential items such as food, clothing, water, and shelter, all needed for proper living. At the United Nations World Summit on Social Development, the 'Copenhagen Declaration' poverty is described as "...a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information" (UN, 1995) In other words, when people are unable to eat, go to school, or have any

access to health care, then they can be considered to be in poverty, regardless of their income.

The standard way of measuring whether an individual is below or above the poverty threshold is income. According to the World Bank (2008), those below the “one-dollar-a-day” are extremely poor. In 2001, 1.1 billion people, about 30% of the world’s population, were estimated to live below the US\$1 per day threshold. Most Sub-Saharan Africa countries find themselves within this bracket. It has been asserted that there is no place where extreme poverty is more evident than sub-Saharan Africa. Statistics have it that almost 50% of the population lives on under \$1 a day - the highest rate of extreme poverty in the world.

It is evident that through a combination of so many factors, as observed by a BBC (2004:7) report, the picture is becoming gloomier by the day. What this means is that a large percentage of the sub-Saharan African population is eating less food than is required to sustain their human bodies (Wodon and Zaman, 2008, p.8). What this implies then is that a good and sustainable agro-enterprise program can be advantageous. It will meet food needs and also generate income. The faith based organizations that are embarking on this noble initiative are drawing inspiration from the Bible. The Bible has so much to say about the poor and how society is to take care of them.

A. Old Testament Concepts on Poverty

In the ancient near eastern lands, there were numerous laws that even predate the Bible which enjoined the rich to care for the poor in the society. In Egypt, in Mesopotamia, among the Hittites and the Canaanites, Lohfink (1991, pp.34-50) highlights how the care for the poor probably had a higher profile in ethical consciousness than in our modern societies. In biblical times, the Bible outlines clearly what should be done to alleviate poverty. Nwaoru (2004, pp. 198-214) asserts that the instruction is a Divine mandate. Throughout the Old Testament, God is represented as having a special care for the poor and destitute (Dawes, 1991, pp. 38-48; Mariottini, 1983; Kim, 1981; Miscall, 1972, pp. 600-612). He delivered the Israelite nation from Egyptian poverty and bondage and mandates that Israel must care for the poor among them for that reason (Deut 24:22). God Himself is the Protector and Savior of the poor (Exod 22:23): “If thou afflict them at all, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath shall wax hot,” etc. (Deut 15:9; 24:15; 1 Sam 2:8; Job

31:16; Psalm 9:18; 12:5; Prov. 19:17; Isaiah 25:4; Eccl 5:8, “one higher than the high regardeth,” etc.). Liberality to the poor is specially enjoined (Deut 15:7ff), and they were to beware of self-deception and grudging in this (Deut 15:9, 10). Divine promises were attached to its fulfillment (Psalm 41:1; 112:9; Prov 22:9; Isaiah 58:7-8; Ezek 18:17; Dan 4:27; etc.). The equality of rich and poor before God and the superiority of the righteous poor to the ungodly rich, are maintained (Prov 19:1, 22; 22:1-2; Eccl 4:13).

Furthermore, special provisions were made on behalf of the poor:

(a) Every third year a tithe was to be given “unto the Levite, to the sojourner, to the fatherless and to the widow” that Yahweh might bless them (Deut 14:28, 29; 26:12ff);

(b) The poor were to have the free use of all that grew spontaneously in field or vineyard during the Sabbatical year (Exod 23:10ff; Lev 25:5-6);

(c) Each year the gleanings of the fields and vineyards should belong to the poor, the corners of fields were to be left for them, and if a sheaf was forgotten it should remain (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19). The Hebrew word for gleaning is *leqet*. It refers to the picking up of leftover grains by the less privileged at harvest (Kaiser, 1980 pp. 482-3).

(d) Fruit and ripe grain in a field might be eaten by any hungry person, but none should be carried away (Deut 23:24-25);

(e) In the Feast of Weeks the poor were to participate (Deut 16:9-12);

(f) Every seventh year there should be a “release” of debts (Deut 15:1ff) ; in the seventh year of servitude the Hebrew bond-servant should go free (Exod 21:2), or in the Jubilee, if that came first, on which occasion—the fiftieth year—property that had been sold returned to its owner or his family (Lev 25:8-17);

(g) They were to lend readily to the poor, and no interest or increase was to be taken from their brethren (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35-37; Deut 15:7ff); in Lev 25:39, no poor Hebrew was to be made a bond-servant, and, if a hired servant, he was not to be ruled with rigor (Lev 25:43); his hire was to be given him daily (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:15); no widow’s raiment was to be taken in pledge (Deut 24:17), nor the handmill, nor the upper millstone so essential for daily life (Deut 24:6), a man’s garment should be returned to him before sundown, and no house should be entered to seize or fetch any pledge (Deut 24:10-13); breach of these laws should be sin and their observance righteousness (Deut 24:13, 15, etc.)

(h) Justice was to be done to the poor (Exod 23:6; Deut 27:19, “Cursed be he that wresteth the justice due to the sojourner, fatherless, and widow”);

(i) Offerings were graduated according to means (Lev 5:7; 12:8).

The prophets and psalmists have many complaints of the unjust treatment and oppression of the poor, contrary to the will of God, and frequent exhortations to justice and a due regard for them (Psalm 10:2, 9; 12:5; 14:6; Isaiah 3:14, 15; Jeremiah 2:34; Ezek 16:49; 18:12, 17; 22:29; Amos 2:7; 4:1; 5:11; 6:4; Habakkuk 3:14). The test of true religion is one’s care for widow and orphans (Isaiah 1:23; see James 1:27), a major step towards a healthy society. Its aim is to create an egalitarian society, a land free from exploitation. One of the greatest hopes highly held was that the eschatological Messiah would bring deliverance and rejoicing to the poor (Psalm 72:12-15; Isaiah 11:4; 29:19; 61:1).

B. New Testament Concepts on Poverty

Concerning how to deal with poverty issues, the New Testament presents some similar injunctions to those of the Old Testament. For instance, one is required to share what he/she has with the poor (Luke 3:11; contrast Acts 6:1). The rich have to provide for the poor as their primary concern (Luke 14:13). Remembering the poor is a necessity (Gal 2:10), hence the rich have an obligation to supply the needs of the poor (James 2:15-16). An adverse consequence awaits the rich when this obligation is neglected (Luke 16:19-31). However, the New Testament goes beyond fundamental injunctions to make almost infeasible demands on the rich to sell what they have and give the proceeds to the poor (Mark 10:21; Matt 19:21; Luke 18:22; 19:8; Acts 2:45; 4:36ff). This radical demand of Jesus on the would-be disciples introduces a new biblical concept of poverty alleviation that goes beyond acts of benevolence (Nwaoru, 2004 p. 203).

The Gospels setting for the life of Jesus himself is that of relative poverty. Born in a stable, He grew as a poor workingman in His parents’ little home in Nazareth until He was thirty years of age. During His ministry, he largely depended on the generosity of His admirers and well-wishers. He once retorted: "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air nests: but the son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Matt 8: 19-20). At his crucifixion, He was stripped of His

garments (Matt 27: 35) and upon His death He was laid in a borrowed tomb.

Jesus identified Himself with the poor as their Liberator, sent to "preach the gospel to the poor." (Luke 4: 18). He commanded that the poor be relieved. He said bluntly to the rich: "Give that which remains as alms" (Luke 11: 41). He told the rich young man: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven" (Matt 19: 21). Putting Himself in the place of the poor, He laid down the criteria for entering heaven: "as long as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt 25: 40).

The early church had a special care for the poor and the needy in her midst. The Apostles, in addition to their strictly religious functions, performed works of charity and relief personally at first, and later through the office of Deacons, who were commissioned "to serve at the tables" of the poor and of the widows (Acts 6:1-4). Also, "the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul: . . . neither was there anyone needy among them. For as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them, and brought the price of the things they sold and laid it down before the feet of the Apostles, and distribution was made to everyone, according as he had need:" (Acts 4:32-35). Apostle Paul used his arduous apostolic travels to collect alms for the poor of the famine-stricken Churches of Judea (1 Cor16:1-3).

C. Views and Responses to Poverty in Christian History

It may well be said that the history of the Church is the history of charity itself (Beck et al., 1911). Poverty at a time even assumed sacred dimensions when many like Francis of Assisi chose it as a form of devotion. Through the centuries many institutions of charity have sprung from the bosom of the Church.

The early monasteries that were established grew to become almshouses, hospitals, places of refuge, institutions for the handicapped, and the needy. Efforts were made to better the lives of fellow believers by those early monasteries. According to Cairns (1996, p. 148), the local monasteries often served as a place for demonstrating better methods of agriculture. Among the things the monks did was the clearing of forests and the improvement of seeds and breeds of livestock. Nearby farmers often emulated the better

techniques that they saw the monks using. This resulted in better yields for the people.

D. Poverty Reduction Initiatives by Churches

There are some Christians who think that the Church should concentrate on spiritual issues to the exclusion of the material ones. Unfortunately, many church members face the reality of poverty daily. If the churches shy away from combating poverty they will fail to convince the poor to trust God. The task of the churches will be made extremely difficult.

III. Agro-Enterprises Initiative

Of the many approaches to reducing poverty, certain church groups have embarked on agro-enterprises as one of the tools to be used (Masenya, 2004, pp.46-49). Recognizing that hunger and food shortages are major problems faced by a large percentage of the world's population, these church groups have turned this challenge into an opportunity to empower others. Their programs are targeted at fighting hunger and training the beneficiaries in better food production techniques for income generation. This is seen by Unruh and Sider (2008, pp. 19-24) as a valid ministry that is as important as preaching. The activities of four church groups chosen for consideration are outlined as follows:

A. The Roman Catholic Church

Catholic Relief Services (CRS)

The Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is an international faith-based humanitarian agency operating in more than 100 countries around the world. For more than half a century, the CRS has worked with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Food for Peace to assist millions of people living on the edge to meet their daily food needs. This in turn provides individuals and communities with the strength necessary to move towards self-sufficiency through opportunities to earn livelihoods. Low-interest agricultural loans are given to help many farmers (The Catholic Relief Services, 2008, pp 2-4). In a project code named PL 480 Title II program, CRS has helped people in the following ways:

1. Helping some small communities in Ethiopia to be able to use small-scale irrigation to grow marketable vegetables.
2. The development of small livestock herds and increase in sales of milk thus increasing the nutritional content of family meals.
3. Helped communities in Niger to avoid disaster through food aid as a result of drought.
4. The launching of a new global agriculture strategy that shall promote integral human development.

B. The Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA)

Rural Development Program

Of all the programs under discussion, this is the one that has Nigeria as its area of strong focus and emphasis (ECWA, 2010). ECWA Rural Development, with headquarters in Jos, Nigeria, was established in the 1976 and incorporated into an ECWA owned company in 1987. Its main focus was to help the membership of the ECWA church which was 70% farmers. The program started by teaching improved agricultural techniques. It also provided a means for farmers to take advantage and put into practice the new knowledge acquired by providing improved agricultural inputs in the form of agro-chemicals, seedlings, animal stocks, feeds, and medicines, and equipments. Trained agricultural extension staff stationed in various areas of the country provided the professional help needed and gave seminars in the administrative units of the church called DCCs (District Church Councils).

The ECWA Rural Development program has a noble and a well defined focus as stated in the goals and objectives of the scheme. The following are some of the objectives relevant to the subject under discussion:

1. To improve the image of farming and to stimulate interest in this occupation because of its importance and potentials to individuals and the nation (Prov 12:11).
2. To improve the quality of life of those already involved in agriculture (physically, socially and spiritually) and to emphasize the accompanying responsibilities. (Mathew 14:20; John 21:6; Ezekiel 47:12).
3. To procure and distribute appropriate quality agricultural inputs and products to farmers so as to help increase their agricultural production (Joel 2:19; Deut 30:9).

The program has been successful in impacting not only members of ECWA church but the general populace. Reports from the scheme (ECWA, 2010) give the indication that it has been of great benefit and has achieved its stated objectives:

Services and Benefits to ECWA Members:

1. Many ECWA families have been positively affected by the program. About 80% of our distributors are either ECWA members or others recommended by ECWA DCCs.
2. Many farmers are into livestock farming as a result of this program. Many more have discovered the potential in farming.
3. A number of farming communities have improved their quality of life through the type of food they take. Their income has also increased.

The improvement in the farmers' foundation stock for animals has helped to increase agricultural output of farmers that are enjoying the products and services of the scheme.

C. The United Methodist Church

United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), Sustainable Agriculture and Development Program

UMCOR is an initiative of the United Methodist Church. It recognizes that hunger and poverty are inextricably linked. As a result, the church has mounted the Sustainable Agriculture and Development program. The program provides small scale appropriate agricultural and nutritional training services. Farmers learn from experience how to grow healthier food more effectively. This improves both their health and their income. This is mainly achieved through the World Hunger/Poverty Advance.

The World Hunger/Poverty Program

According to Kim (2003, para.3), the executive secretary for World Hunger/Poverty program for UMCOR, the Program develops and supports integrated initiatives that emphasize among many others:

- Agriculture, rural development, and food security;
- Stewardship of natural resources and the environment;
- Education, training, and literacy;
- Microcredit and enterprise development;
- Urban agriculture;

Advocacy to alleviate hunger and poverty;
The mobilization of resources through United Methodist connections.

Through the World Hunger/Poverty Advance, UMCOR not only supplies food for hungry people, but also helps poor countries move forward with development. This program supports projects providing direct assistance of food, health, shelter, and education. It also backs long-term solutions that eradicate the root causes of hunger and poverty such as advocacy for appropriate public policies to bring hope to people in despair. The following are a few of the areas of impact among many others;

Beekeeping

Beekeeping training is one of UMCOR's Sustainable Agriculture & Development Programs in Liberia that is helping farmers improve their livelihood, build new homes and provide education for their children.

Field Schools for Farmers

Farmers are sponsored to attend UMCOR's Integrated Crop and Pest Management-Farmer Field School. Trainings last for 18-weeks during which farmers learn new techniques on how to best manage their farm by using locally-available products and organic methods to produce healthy crops that improve their income.

Growing Moringa Trees

Farmers are trained on how to grow Moringa trees. In Nigeria, the Moringa tree (Hausa- *Zogale*, Yoruba-*Ewe Ile*, *Ewe igbale*, Igbo-*Ikwe Oyibo*) has been used over the years. Leaves from the Moringa tree are a highly nutritious supplement aiding those who do not have adequate food supplies in developing countries. Farmers in Ghana, Liberia, Sierra-Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo have benefited from the additional income that Moringa can bring. The leaves are sold for use as food and tea. Then the leaf powder is used as a nutritious food additive that aids in overcoming malnutrition.

D. The Seventh-day Adventist Church

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA)

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) was established in 1956. It is a global humanitarian organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. “ADRA works with people in poverty and distress to create just and positive change through empowering partnerships and responsible action (ADRA Network Strategic Plan 2007-2012).” The agency’s work seeks to improve the quality of life of those in need. ADRA invests in the potential of these individuals through community development initiatives targeting Food Security, Economic Development, Primary Health and Basic Education.

Poverty and Food Security

ADRA tries to counter poverty by considering the whole person. It has implemented thousands of projects to take care of specifics like education, water, shelter or food. The Agency “considers it a vital responsibility to ensure that everyone, no matter age, race, gender, religion or creed, not only survives, but thrives” (ADRA Network Report, 2008).

An emphasis on rural and agricultural development must be an essential element of a successful strategy for alleviating mass poverty, not only because agriculture is a source of food, but because agriculture and rural off-farm activities are a major source of income for the rural poor. Hence their development helps to reduce poverty - provided there are no marked inequalities of wealth in rural society. Furthermore, reductions in rural hunger and poverty slow down the drift to the towns and thus have an impact on hunger and poverty in urban areas as well (Broka, 2002, pp. 3, 47).

Direct public action to fight hunger requires no instrumental justification. Hunger is one of the direst manifestations of poverty and is a violation of a basic human right recognized in legally binding international instruments. That should be enough. However, it should be pointed out that there is mounting evidence that fighting hunger also helps reduce poverty since hunger and under nourishment reduce labor productivity, increase susceptibility to illness, worsen school performance in children, reduce the willingness to undertake risky but more profitable investments and transmit themselves from one generation to the next (Broka, 2002, p. 6).

Agreeing with Broka’s assertion, Pinstrup-Andersen and Pandya-Lorch (2001, pp. 109-114) submitted that most of the world’s poor are rural-based and depend one way or the other on agriculture. They gave four reasons why the development of agro-enterprises and

development must be vigorously pursued in low-income developing countries:

1. “to alleviate poverty through employment creation and income generation in rural areas;
2. “to meet growing food needs driven by rapid population growth and urbanization;
3. “ to stimulate overall economic growth, given that agriculture is the most viable lead sector for growth and development in many low-income developing countries; and
4. “to conserve natural resources. Poverty is the most serious threat to the environment in developing countries: lacking means to appropriately intensify agriculture, the poor are often forced to overuse the natural resource base to meet basic needs.”

Areas of Interventions by ADRA

1. Increased access to farm inputs
2. Increased extension services and adult literacy programs for farmers
3. Crop diversification and cultivation of drought-resistant varieties.
4. Links with markets and improved agricultural product marketing.
5. Improved infrastructure and off-season crop production through irrigation, and creation of small dams and canals.
6. Livestock promotion for asset, income and nutrition
7. Building associations and groups among farmers to enable and ensure capacity for market and access to input.

Methodology for Carrying out the Projects

1. Teaching appropriate and innovative agricultural methods
2. Provision of opportunity to diversify livelihood and developing new sources of income.
 - a. Small-scale commercial farming ventures like poultry, bee-keeping, milk production from cows and goats, livestock fattening, etc
 - b. Non-farm opportunities like food processing and other ways of adding value to crop and livestock products.
3. Production and use of organic compost and natural pest control methods to avoid reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides.
4. Improvement in production and marketing to increase farm family income.

VI. Conclusion

It is very clear from the foregoing that the issue of poverty is one that requires an intentional strategy to deal with. The faith-based organizations discussed have done and are still doing a lot in meeting the needs of the poor and weak. More efforts should be directed to making more funds available so that other aspects left unexplored can be addressed. It is to be an all out effort because, as in the words of Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga (Religious Forums, 2009), “poverty and social injustice are the real weapons of mass destruction.” It is as serious as that!

Recommendations

Having considered the enormity of the task before the faith based organizations discussed, we wish to make the following recommendations to the church in this part of Sub-Saharan Africa:

1. The Church should provide basic education to the poor on income generating skills that will enable them provide for themselves. Efforts should be made to support the farmers, rural traders and other partners to co-operate efficiently and organize themselves in professional associations and cooperative groups.
2. The church should broker the acquisition of small agro-business loans from Micro-finance outfits. In an African setting, a loan of the equivalent of \$US500 in farm inputs and cash will empower a family for self sustenance. However, a strong mechanism must be put in place for implementation and monitoring.
3. The church should establish agro-processing industries to process, package and preserve yields especially in harvest seasons. For example, Cassava processing plants can be established in local cassava growing communities to process yields for marketing. An average plant costs the equivalent of \$US 2500. This will minimize wastage and at the same provide employment in the rural areas.
4. Local interfaith community groups should be formed to address poverty alleviation through education and training. Experts should be invited to give talks and orientation on better farm management practices.

5. Families may be given stocks of animals to breed. Arrangements can be made on how to share the milk, eggs, or offspring of the animals between the church organization and individuals so empowered.

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