

# **THE THEOLOGY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY IN AFRICA: A REFLECTION**

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## **Abstract**

*Development is a complex concept which includes education, industrial, technological, medical, communication, transportation, legal and administrative dimension. The goal of the total development of a society is to better the welfare of human life. The major values of development are life sustenance, self esteem and freedom from servitude. It is unfortunate that the African "Life-leadership" mentality has entered the church. In most established churches in Africa, many of the leaders and officers are retirees. Little wonder such churches are losing membership as teenagers and the young ones are moving to new churches and denominations. The approach to theology of human development therefore is essentially to interpret and analyze the biblical revelation concerning the essence and welfare of people. Put another way, what is God's intention for human life in the area of education, health and shelter? What does our source of theology, especially the Bible has to say about the social economic, political and religious quality of human life. The paper delved into the exposition of poverty and theology in human development in Africa.*

**Keywords:** Theology, humanity, Africa, Development and poverty

## **Introduction**

Contemporary African life is characterized by poverty in almost every sphere of life-economic, social, political and religious. Many Africans cannot afford the basic human needs - good food, decent clothing and shelter. There is absence of peaceful coexistence in many African societies due to political, religious and ethnic hostilities. Political leadership in many nations is marked by disorientation and perfidy. Quite unfortunately, the religious scene is full of deceit and bigotry. This paper is concerned, however, with the fundamental poverty of human development in Africa. It deals with anthropological poverty which goes beyond physical goods and material possessions but the very being, essence and dignity of the human person.

The purpose of the paper is to re-examine the theology of human development and to draw out implications for solution to the problem of poverty in Africa. The paper is structured in form of attempting answers to five related questions; **One**, why a theology of human development" (Rationale for choice of topic); **Two**, what is the human development situation in Africa? (The issue of poverty); **Three**, what is a theology of human development? (Description of a theory); **Four**, what are some implications of a theology of human development for solution to the poverty in Africa? (Need for progressive leadership, citizenship, productive work ethics and genuine spirituality), **Five**, where do we go from here?

## **Why a Theology of Human Development?**

The theology of human development is essential for the advancement of Africa and the world as a whole. The current state of human life in Africa deeply concerns the authors. Observing the economic, social, and political progress of other continents raises the question: why is African life

still marked by poverty, suffering, failure, and mediocrity? Why does Africa continue to be classified as a developing or underdeveloped continent? As beings created in God's image, humans are God's most valuable creation. Therefore, enhancing human life should remain a central focus of theology. These pressing issues call for a biblical, philosophical, and theological examination of humanity, existence, and life. Given these concerns, a theological exploration of Africa's human development challenges is both timely and necessary.

### **Understanding the Theology of Human Development**

According to Sedmak (2022), on the subject above, he opines that “atheology of integral human development (IHD) is committed to bridging this gap between means and ends, between external progress and inner growth; it is committed to integrating our technological possibilities into our moral and spiritual identity.” In the words of Morrison (2023) defines theology of human development in a more spiritual way. He therefore opines thus:

A spiritual theology of integral human development initiates a vigilance to take on God's wisdom and the first fruit of the Spirit, namely love (Gal 5:22). The “manifestation of the Spirit,” aimed at “the common good” (1 Cor 12:7), leads the person of faith towards “the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10), a “weeping” (Ps. 37:1) of compassion in spirit. Here, we encounter the heart of integral human development and an opportunity to speak of spiritual theology through an ethical, metaphysical lens. For the life of the soul, “*de profundis*,” “from the depths of God,” has a double meaning: (i) vulnerability towards the other and (ii) the vulnerability of human fragility inside the soul ... The vulnerability towards the other helps to reveal what we are called prophetically to do (love in truth), while the Infinite Other, God, enters uniquely into the depths of our lives, orienting our vulnerability, ensoulment, and weakness towards a redemptive road (truth in love). This is a road to “the depths of God,” an acceptance of the Christ who can rise within our wounds and tears, pointing to new directions, new life, or even a retreat back to God as a means to jump further into grace (n.p).

According to Baptist World Aid, the version of development as described in the Bible is found in the creation narratives. According to the story, God's intentions are for development of the world into a better place where there will be wealth, safety of creation, accommodation and equitable communities where love is celebrated. That is to say that God's intention is to build and develop the world to be a better place where love and compassion for humanity will control the affairs of humankind. Sedmak (2022) citing Cosmao (1970), sees Compassion as “an existential fellowship with everyman [person] who strives to unite the world under a common destiny and to collectively create the structures that the realization of this aspiration calls for. To love is to identify oneself with one's neighbour, with all men [persons], and to create with them the conditions for their self-fulfilment” (p.157). Therefore, the theology of human development is centred on mutual concern for one another. It is not a concern for the today improvement of humankind where love and empathy play a vital role and selfishness is relegated to the background.

Hence, Christian theology can be understood as an interpretative examination of God's revelation, incorporating church doctrine, tradition, and human experience within a specific worldview. This definition follows the systematic theology approach. When applied to human development, this theological method seeks to interpret and analyze biblical revelations regarding human well-being and purpose. In essence, it explores God's intentions for humanity in key areas such as education, health, and shelter.

Furthermore, it considers what theological sources, particularly the Bible, reveal about the economic, social, political, and religious dimensions of human life. Now, it is necessary to undertake this exploration, even if only briefly. What human life ought to be can be inferred from the biblical revelation. The heavens and the earth created by God were affirmed to be good (Genesis 1:4,10,12,1,21,25), in fact very good (Genesis 1:31). Before creating the human being, God first created the physical materials needed for the sustenance of human life. After creating man God pronounced blessing on man for fruitfulness, multiplication and fullness of life (Genesis 1:28). When man sinned, God destroyed the world but he renewed his covenant with man through Noah and his descendants (Genesis 9:1 -17).

When the Israelites were in suffering, bondage and oppression in Egypt, they cried to the Lord who heard them; He remembered his covenant with Abraham and delivered them (Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 2:23-25). When they entered into a covenant relationship to become God's "treasured possession..., a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5,6), God demonstrated his interest in their social life by giving them laws to regulate their social conduct: personal injuries (Ex. 21:12-36), protection of property (22:1-25), social responsibility (21:16-31), and laws of justice and mercy (23:1 -9). They were also given laws related to diet and health (Lev. 11,17 cf 12-15). Lack of space does not allow further expansion and specific examples.

God also instructed them to use the family life for education and personality development (Deut. 5:4-8). While he remained as the ultimate ruler of Israel he helped the people to set up a monarchical form of government led by kings from Saul, David, Solomon and others through Zedekiah (1 Sam. 8-11 King 25). Qualities of good leadership and governance as stated in Proverbs include: diligence (12:24), trustworthy messengers (13:17), ability to discern (18:15), ability to stand up under adversity (24:10)/ God thus purposed to give them social direction, order and stability. After they had possessed Canaan, the Promised Land, God sent them away to Babylonian captivity because of their sin and rebellion. While they were in exile God assured them that his plans for their total welfare and prosperity remained intact (Jeremiah 29:11).

In the New Covenant, the Lord Jesus Christ stated that his mission in the world is to save, heal, deliver the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). He came into the world to give man fullness of life (John 10:10a). Jesus carried out a total ministry to develop man spiritually, physically and socially. He forgave sins and delivered those who were oppressed by Satan and demons (Luke 19, Mark 1:23-27). He healed the sick and fed the hungry (Matt. 8:15-21). He removed social and racial barriers and restored relationships (John 4; Luke 10:30-37).

The hallmarks of effective leadership stated in the Bible include modeling, exemplary living (1 Tim. 4:12), service/help (Matt. 20:25- 28; John 13:1-17), ability/capacity, fear of God, trustworthiness and honesty (Exodus 18:21). Moreover, the ultimate destiny of humanity is to have eternal fellowship with God in heaven with a life characterized by celebration, fellowship, perfection, joy, worship, service, knowledge, purity and eternity (Revelation 19:1,4,7; 21:4,27; 22:1 - 5). The plan and intention of God for creation in general and man in particular is clear from this biblical survey. God has concern for good quality human existence that should be characterized by economic buoyancy, social well-being, political stability and religious fulfillment.

## **What is the Human Development Situation in Africa?**

Human development is a description of the human condition of a society. "Development means an improvement in the quality of life, a situation by which every citizen will have the basic needs met in terms of adequate food supply, clothing, habitable shelter, access to education and health care." Development, therefore, means the essence and welfare of people measured in terms of quality of life. In standard practice "Human development is measured by the human development index (HDI) which itself is a combination of indicators of education, health and income, seen in the context of what is sufficient to ensure adequate living standards."

It can simply be said that the condition of human life in Africa will not be easily provided. The sad fact is that Africa is a suffering continent. Next to the universal problem of sin, poverty is Africa's greatest problem as seen in many aspects of African life. The poverty in this land is many-sided. It is economic, social, political and religious. It is also material, physical, spiritual, moral and intellectual.

Economically, many Africans lack basic material goods - food, drinking water, clothing, health care and housing. Social amenities are in extremely poor conditions; no good roads, no regular power supply, few industries, sub-standard medical institutions, educational institutions are underfunded and they are bedeviled with strikes and cultism. In the political arena, many African nations are going through political instability. There is a desperate search for an appropriate political ideology. There are creations of new constitutions every decade in Nigeria. Governance and daily life is characterized by bribery and corruption. Human rights are arrogantly abused. Violent ethnic clashes take place in different parts of Africa. Hostilities existed for many years in the home of Africa-Djibouti, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. Senseless wars do take place in West Africa: Chad Republic, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The story is not any better religiously. Along with increase in religious activities, there is a corresponding increase in restlessness and godlessness. Religion has also become a weapon of war and destruction as seen in the war of Sudan and in the riots of Nigeria, especially that of Kaduna in the 1980s. According to Ibrahim (1989), a major conflict between Christians and Muslims erupted in the 1980s in Kafanchan located in southern Kaduna State, at the intersection of both religious communities. This unrest was fueled by radical leaders who successfully mobilized a group of young, educated individuals concerned that the nation might fail to safeguard their religious community.

When these are put together: socio-economic chaos, political anarchy and religious disorientation it portrays a picture of anthropological poverty "which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods or possessions but strikes at the very being, essence and dignity of the human person." Considered from the angle of HDI, whereas no African country has per capita Gross National Product (GNP) up to five thousand dollars (\$5,000), that of industrialized nations like United States, Germany and Japan is greater than fifteen thousand dollars (\$15,000). The *per capita* income for many African nations is barely above three hundred dollars (\$300). Life expectancy is now 47 years, and poverty rate is 70%. Indices like these point to crises in the African economy (Abegunrin, 2004, Igun, 2004, Mveng, 1994).

The root of Africa's existential crisis and the devaluation of human life lies in an "inadequate philosophy for living," coupled with a "crisis of indecision and identity." The perception of human dignity in modern Africa has become distorted, as many Africans gradually lose their sense of self-worth and the positive pride tied to their identity. This has led to a diminished and inauthentic sense

of existence, weakening faith in African heritage, identity, and future prospects. Many young people now believe that success is only achievable by migrating abroad. Meanwhile, politicians frequently travel to Europe and America, seeking to adopt foreign governmental systems, while scientists look for technologies to replicate. As a result, Africa is often portrayed to the world as a society dependent on borrowed identities and an artificial way of life. Clearly, there is an urgent need for human development in Africa. The question remains: how can Christian theology contribute to this transformation?

### **The Place of a Theology of Human Development in Poverty Reduction in Africa**

Studies based on Africa's dismal Human Development Index (HDI) indicate a lack of significant progress. What factors have contributed to this situation? Why is Africa's human development still emerging in the 21st century? Modern Africa remains deprived of many essential aspects of a good life. This section explores four critical areas of poverty and deficiency: leadership, citizenship, work ethics, and spirituality.

**Poverty of Progressive Leadership:** Many analysts believe that leadership plays a significant role in Africa's underdevelopment. Christian theologian S. O. Abogunrin succinctly captures this by asking, "Why Africa is poor, and why has it failed to develop technologically despite its abundant natural and human resources?" He attributes Africa's political, social, economic, and spiritual crises primarily to poor leadership. Similarly, journalist Sonala Olumhense reinforces this perspective, asserting that "poverty continues to plague Africa largely due to the lack of commitment from its leaders to eradicate it." Across various sectors, Africa faces a shortage of dynamic, effective, competent, and credible leaders.

Leadership is a contemporary issue of interest and study in developed countries. At the international Christian scene two examples of theories of leadership are: leadership by influence of John C. Maxwell and transformation leadership of Jim Herrington. The authors wish to propose the concept of developmental leadership for the Africa context, that is, leadership as an influential relationship that is God-given to develop others. An important leadership task right now in the African context is to help develop people along their human potentials, talents and gifts. Euro-American society has gone too far in the human potential movement as seen in humanistic philosophy and psychology. The opposite is the case in Africa; put the other way, Africa has not emphasized the development of human potentials. There is no adequate leadership training and development in Africa. Perhaps this is because African senior citizens, elder-leaders prefer to rule for life and die in leadership position rather than elect, train and hand over leadership to younger generation.

This leadership deficiency manifests in political and ecclesiastical lives. Service is a hallmark of credible leadership and "the dream of an economically and technologically developed and prosperous Africa required selfless committed leaders, who are ready to serve the people rather than themselves." African political leadership is characterized by hypocrisy, mediocrity and incompetence to develop a productive economy. Some African nations have become mere importers, distributors and consumers. Only farmers constitute the real goods producing segment of many African nations and "their production is done with primitive tools that have remained the same for centuries." How do you create jobs in an economy where you import many food items, writing pens, toothpicks, shoes/sandals and even underwear?

The situation is not better in the African church. The church is not giving enough emphasis on training of leaders. There are crises of leadership in many denominations in Nigeria. People should

tremble when called upon to lead. However, because of material benefits, choice of key church leaders is often marked with manipulation and competition. Sometimes it is even accompanied with threat of death of opponents. At the church pastoral level, it is known that the three major responsibilities of the pastor are to care, to lead and to preach/teach. The pastor leads people to set and achieve objectives, he mobilizes people and manages resources, and he coordinates activities and presides at meetings. An important concept of the pastoral ministry is to equip the saints for work of ministry (Eph. 4:12). Whereas the pastoral leadership is an equipping service, many church pastors are weak in this area. Indeed poor leadership techniques and managerial skills is one reason for many church crises. The more serious problem is that, because many pastors are not aware of this, they are not anxious to learn about leadership, to further develop themselves. Some pastors stop further study after their basic theological education. How can they develop? Africa needs sincere, radical, sacrificial leadership like Mahatma Gandhi of India to develop her human potential and material resources. Leadership failure is not the only reason for the problem of human development in Africa. Another one is irresponsible citizenship.

**Poverty of Responsible Citizenship:** African citizens are yet to realize that a nation or organization with mediocre leadership cannot achieve its full potential. A society needs to criticize its leadership objectively in order to develop. Do Africans not deserve the leaders they get? Africans often allow incompetent, daft, sometimes morally deficient people to rule us. This is done by engaging incompetent personnel due to sentiment, tribalism or wrong choice of leaders. Two related, relevant causes of this underdevelopment - complacency and illiteracy - will be highlighted. A measure of complacency among African citizens can be seen in their wrong ways of pursuing excellence. Africans are often satisfied too often, too soon with average achievements. Many students pursue let-my-people go grades. Many workers are putting in the minimum service to retain their jobs.

When a position of leadership is vacant, there ought to be need to look for people with track records and intimidating credentials. Instead people with less-than-average leadership abilities manipulate the system and rise to the top. Of course they know they do not have what it takes to perform to retain their offices. Unfortunately, the uncritical populace will tolerate their maladministration and sometimes tyranny and oppression. This is a negative form of perseverance, it is actually fatalism.

Another cause of this unsatisfactory conduct on the part of African citizens is the problem of illiteracy. "Literacy for development" is interestingly the motto of the National Centre for Adult Education, Kano, Nigeria. Because of illiteracy, the electorates do not know the power of their votes, their rights to elect and change their leaders in a democracy.

Owing to illiteracy and poverty the people become gullible, compromise their welfare, and allow politicians to deceive them. The suffering masses receive salts, matches and peanuts to stand in the sun for hours to vote for the wrong but popular candidates. Gustavo Gutierrez has well analyzed the relationship between the bondages of poverty and underdevelopment:

Poverty means dearth, lack of food and housing, the inability to attend properly to healthy and education needs, the exploitation of workers, rampant unemployment, the lack of respect for one's human dignity, and unjust limitations placed on personal freedom in the areas of self-expression, politics and religion. Poverty is a situation that destroys people, families and individuals.

What is more disturbing in the African leadership is that the educated leaders perpetrate this ugly cycle for their own selfishness. The elites, who really behave like educated illiterates, are sometimes the enemies of African development.

**Poverty of Productive Work Ethics:** God has designed the human life in such a way that work is a means to create wealth, to possess material blessings and prosperity. The authors have stated elsewhere that work is a means of human development socially, economically, spiritually and, therefore, ontologically. Does Africa hope to develop more if they work less? Nigeria for example is a nation of industrial strikes. There was a time three important groups rendering social services went on strike simultaneously: University lecturers, Nurses and Bankers. The Nigerian Labour Congress has once led the nation to go on strike for a whole week in January 2012. The intention here is not to indict the workers for going on strike, since sometimes the government is deaf and insensitive and strike is the last means to seek justice. The issue is the substantial economic loss associated with such strikes.

In addition to the frequent strikes by workers, lateness to work is a significant yet often overlooked factor contributing to Africa's underdevelopment. The habitual loss of productive labor hours due to tardiness has serious economic and social consequences. Time is a crucial resource—essential for business, governance, and national development. However, in many African societies, the widespread disregard for punctuality, commonly referred to as “*African time*,” has become a major obstacle to economic progress. However, Eroke (2013) notes that most absenteeism and lateness to work are unscheduled by the workers; though it has hindered productivity but it is not solely the fault of the worker. Hence, one of the most common justifications for habitual lateness is the poor state of roads and inefficient transportation systems. Many workers struggle to reach their places of employment on time due to traffic congestion, bad road networks, and unreliable public transportation. While these infrastructural deficiencies are real, they do not entirely justify the widespread culture of lateness. Instead, they highlight the need for better planning, improved governance, and individual responsibility.

There are some African entrepreneurs who can help to develop the African economy in private sectors to produce goods and services that can benefit people. They, however, give up when they realize the harsh economic atmosphere characterized by bribery and corruption. The evil of corruption is a major factor for the underdevelopment and poverty in Africa. Africans need to do business so as to create jobs and wealth in an environment of peace that is conducive for a dynamic enterprise. Many Africans believe and engage in more worship and less work. Will that false spirituality develop Africa?

**Poverty of Genuine Spirituality:** Genuine Christian spirituality is a wholistic concept, a balance of good relationship with God and meaningful co-existence with fellow humans. The spiritual dimension of the problem of human development in Africa will now be examined from the viewpoint of worship/prayer and work. While competent leadership, responsible citizenship and productive work ethics can go a long way to help develop African humanity, spirituality should not be ignored. For instance, the poverty alleviation programme of the Nigerian government is only an economic approach to development and it needs the support of other areas. Since Africans are incurably religious, it is equally important for them to pray for God's blessing, favour and prosperity. This makes the extensive day and night prayers going on in Africa appropriate, if it is well conducted. However, church vigil becomes false spirituality when it is not combined with or if it hinders practical work as Gbadero (2004) once lamented.

There are many Nigerian Christian students who would rather participate in nights of vigil a few days to important examinations to succeed rather than engaging themselves in a steady programme of diligent studies to acquire skills and knowledge required to pass their examinations in flying

colours. Africa needs genuine spirituality that will balance hardwork with prayer to acquire wealth. The problem of vigil is an example of lack of balance between biblical orthodoxy and contemporary needs of people. While the established churches are committed to sound Christian doctrines, the new Pentecostal/Charismatic churches seem to be responding better to the existential needs of people.

Religious practices without spirituality are militating against the progress of Africa. A religious civil servant who is lazy at work lacks spirituality. A church-going business manager who evades tax is not being spiritual. A church officer who is a business person who does not execute the contract awarded by government for the welfare of citizens is pseudo spiritual. Daniel is a good biblical example of a person who maintained the sensitive balance: hard work and devotion to God. No wonder he excelled in a strange land (Daniel 6:1-5).

The final issue to be considered which, though important, cannot be examined in detail is the matter of colonization and slavery which has become a recurrent decimal in African life. Is the problem of African under-development due to the curse of Noah on Canaan the son of Ham, recognizing that Africans are descendants of Canaan, Cush and Nimrod? (Genesis 9:18; 25:10; 6:8). Even if that were so faith, in the death of Jesus Christ he can remove the curse and turn it into blessing (Gal. 3:10-14).

## **Conclusion**

Human development is a complex issue and the authors donot pretend to have done exhaustive analysis or to have offered complete solution. The four areas of need identified and discussed are progressive leadership style, citizens alive to their civic responsibilities, productive work ethics and wholistic spirituality. A necessary starting point is for the individual African to engage in self-development, making efforts to be and to do the best (2 Tim. 2:15; 4:21), striving passionately towards excellence (Phil. 4:8). Each person in a position of leadership, pastoral or political, should relate with and influence people to develop them. There is need to emphasize leadership for service, for sustenance and development of human life in Africa. There is need to rebuild a self-esteem that is based on authentic Africaness. Discipleship leadership training on human development will be a worthwhile Christian education project. It should include lessons on responsible citizenship and work ethics.

Churches should be led to engage in human development and social services for job creation. Theological institutions should design and offer more courses on leadership, administration and management to train pastors, to help impact and develop African humanity and society. Christian denominations need to play more active roles in the political development of Africa-monitoring of electoral process, promotion and defence of human rights, etc. Christians in public services should demonstrate exemplary commitment to godly work ethics. More Christians who will not compromise biblical standards should be involved in politics. The church should crusade against corruption and influence African governments to move towards a more productive economy.

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