

CHURCH AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN TANZANIA

35% of the Tanzanian population lives under poverty line. This implies that half of the Tanzanians survive by using less than a dollar per day. This situation indicates that people have low purchasing power, the situation that makes people fail to be accessible to food facilities, shelter and provision of social services like health and education. The causes of poverty in Tanzania and Africa at large are both internal and external in the sense that people in Africa are partly responsible for the situation of poverty, the plight that is also severed by the unfair global economy. Let us see briefly how people themselves are responsible for the present situation of poverty. The plight of poverty is partly caused by people themselves when they do not like to work hard, produce and compete for their survival according to the tempo of liberalism. Tanzania's history of African socialism still influences negatively the people's mentality concerning competition and individual initiatives bearing in mind that people were used to state economy by which the state socially addressed the people's needs, though insufficiently and inefficiently.

As far as production is concerned, some people in the families (mostly women) work hard for the family's survival while other people in the family (mostly men) are idle as they use their time to do unproductive things like drinking alcohol although I would not like to make a fallacy of generalization that all men are non-industrious. In a case whereby some people work while others are idle, this implies that human labour is not fully utilized for development. This discourages even those who work hard since they are demotivated by lack of solidarity and economic incentives. People's responsibility for poverty is also portrayed by corruption and mismanagement of resources, which distort economic and socio-political development. Another aspect of poverty, which is indicative of the people's responsibility for the cause of poverty, includes bearing of many children without proportionality with the available economic resources, the situation that has led to the explosion of population in Africa.

The external causes of poverty include mainly unfair global economy. This includes fall of prices for commodities from Africa in the international market whereby the prices for the processed raw materials is highly non-proportional to the price of raw materials. Strict laws and high taxes against exportation of agricultural commodities from the poor countries to the Western countries and subsidy or protectionism for the farmers in the Western countries

have hindered the poor countries from accessibility to the world market. This situation affects African farmers in that they are not given equal chances of competition in the world market. This contradicts the policy of liberalism, which claims to grant freedom of doing business. It is as if freedom of doing business is only meant for the rich actors but not the poor. Moreover, the fact that the rich nations prefer raw materials from Africa without favouring processing them in Africa makes Africa fail to develop industrially. Worse enough, the corporations, which extract raw materials in the poor countries are not ready to contribute to the social well-being of the people by paying taxes for the betterment of the society where they operate. Signing of contracts of paying taxes after some years proves that these corporations are not socially oriented. They are only interested in the pursuit of their economic interests at the expense of social and ecological life. When some African governments demand taxes from these corporations these corporations threaten to leave these countries and go to another places. Of course, these corporations provide people with employment in Africa, but this is not enough.

In the context of this situation of poverty, the church in Tanzania has been trying her best level to counteract the problems of poverty in various ways. As far as the causes, which are within the people's control, the church has been proclaiming the gospel that challenges people to work hard and avoid oppression and exploitation of any kind although the church's emphasis on life in heaven has sometimes made it fail to bring the gospel on earth. However, the church challenges the traditional African societies to respect women as equals to men. This implies that both men and women are challenged to utilize their time for productive things and leave things that lead to economic backwardness. However, the church has no concern about controlling of population since family planning by using *condomes* is still rejected by some conservative churches. The same applies to the fight against HIV/AIDS whereby the use of *condomes* as one of the preventive measures is scolded by the church in spite of the church's big contribution in taking care of the AIDS victims and educating the masses against the spread of this pandemic by other means which are accepted by the church. It is noteworthy mentioning that at least there are other sources of information against HIV/AIDS, which are free from the church on the aspect of educating the masses against HIV/AIDS.

From the time of colonialism and missionary era up to now, the church has contributed a lot to the provision of social services like education and health services. The Churches' contribution to the establishment of schools and colleges helped a great deal in the alleviation of poverty since people were enlightened to know many things for controlling their environment and meet their needs. Through education, the Africans could get jobs and salaries for their lives and become independent from the African communities upon which they were dependent. Education brought about social changes in Africa like building houses and having improved farms for economic development. The introduction of mission hospitals and dispensaries improved people's health by curing

diseases that had killed many people in Africa, the diseases that could not be cured by African medicine.

However, the western health services and Christianity did not respect the African medicine, which had cured many diseases in Africa for many millions of years. This created the problem whereby some Africans left their traditional medicines and resorted only to the western medicine. But the problem remained that the western medicine was and still is expensive to the extent that western medicine is accessible to the elites. Again, many people stay far away from the hospitals. The financial support for these hospitals from outside is decreasing. Also taxes from within the countries are not enough to support these hospitals. All these problems facing the inherited western health structures lead us to the proposals of shifting the government budget from spending much money on the hospitals to using health budget for primary health care, dispensaries and preventive measures, which can benefit the majority in the country. This implies that private hospitals can continue to exist, but the government budget for health must be reallocated or reformed for the purpose of reaching the majority in a way that marches with the countries economic ability. This has to go hand in hand with recognition of African medicine that can help people to cure diseases, which must not necessarily be cured by western medicine. This implies that African medicine should be further researched so as to make an improvement on it.

The church in Tanzania has established health insurance programs whereby the members contribute a certain amount of money for health insurance so as to have the health fund which contributes 90% of the medical charges that do not exceed 100,000/= Tanzanian shillings within a year. Such health insurance has greatly benefited members to have access to health services according to my experience in the North-Western Diocese (NWD) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) where members no longer hesitate to go to dispensaries since this health fund makes people support one another. Of course, this health fund cannot suffice for expensive treatments beyond the given limit, but for the cases, which disturb many people in the rural areas, this fund has been helpful and reliable.

The church in Tanzania in cooperation with other churches in the rich countries has contributed to the debt cancellation. The church, on the biblical basis, has challenged the western governments and societies to cancel debts, which were a burden to the poor since payment of debts implied lack of social services to the poor. It was good to realize that through the churches' advocacy of the poor on this aspect, the rich countries agreed to cancel some debts for Tanzania and other African countries. The cancellation of these debts has created relief for Tanzania. This relief has enabled Tanzania to improve schools, hospitals, dispensaries and roads for socio-economic development since the condition for debt cancellation is the use of the saved money for social services. Due to debt cancellation provision of social services in the country have been improved in that medicines are available for all and enrolment especially for

primary school education has been high compared to the past when the parents had to contribute money for primary school education.

The church has also involved itself in helping people to help themselves through some projects like Savings and Credit Cooperative unions (SACCOS), which enable the poor to be accessible to financial facilities without obstacles that they experience in the banks whose requirements are difficult to abide with. In this way, people can be accessible to money, which they have to use for productive small projects. This helps people to be innovative and self-reliant. It is in this way that the church does not only handle the outcome of poverty, but also obstructs the cause of it. In a similar way, the church in Tanzania engages herself in the democratisation of the population so that the Tanzanians can hold the politicians responsible for their development. The church in Tanzania has been involved in educating the masses about democracy, especially during times of election, the contribution whose fruits is partly viewed in peace and political stability, which Tanzania enjoys. However, much has to be done so that democracy may be deeply understood as a phenomenon, which covers daily life of the people, not only a theme of election but also a theme that aims at enabling the masses to control socio-economic life and therefore enable people to determine their destinies.

Generally speaking, the contribution of the church to the alleviation of poverty in Tanzania is based on the biblical and theological basis, which challenges human beings to love one-another, help one-another and behave ethically and justly against oppressions, exploitation and individualism. In order to achieve this goal, the church in Tanzania is committed to educate the masses concerning human rights, democracy and responsibility in bringing about their own development. Besides these efforts, the church in Tanzania tries her best level to make sure that people are accessible to financial facilities through the financial institutions like “Savings and Credit Cooperative Unions- SACCOS” from which poor people can borrow money for their small projects as self-initiatives as opposed to the dependency mentality. The fact that the church is very close to the people both in urban and rural areas makes the church an important institution in the task of reducing poverty. Just like how Jesus was concerned about both spiritual and physical needs of the human beings, the church is also challenged to address itself to the needs of the people, lest the church becomes irrelevant in Tanzania and Africa at large.

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In his book “A Theology of Poverty Reduction in Tanzania – A quest for Christian Socio-economic and Political Vision” Dr. Keshomshahara emphasises the role of the Church in addressing socio-economic and political issues in Tanzania during this period of Globalisation. This book was written as a part of fulfilling the requirements for doctoral studies in Germany. It was published by CENTRAL TANGANYIKA PRESS (CTP) IN 2008, with ISBN number: 978 9976 662 280 1. You can order that book from Central Tanganyika Press through the following address: P. O. Box 1129 Dodoma, Tanzania, East Africa or through the following email for more information: abedkesho@yahoo.co.uk