

MAINSTREAMING RELIGION IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINED DEVELOPMENT

Matamanda Rajab Ibrahim

Researcher, Urban sustainability, livelihoods and environmental planning, Harare, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

Religion is a critical factor that is correlated to socio economic development, yet the two are often dichotomized and this often results in distorted analysis of the socio-economic complexities at the local and national level. This paper is based on literature search and will outline the relationship between religion and socio-economic development based on various religious teachings. The findings are that religion promotes sustained socio-economic development based on equity, justice and fairness. The paper concludes by giving recommendations of how religious values and practices can be incorporated in policies to foster sustained socio-economic development.

Key words: religion, sustainable development, protestant work ethic theory

Introduction

Socio-economic woes currently bedeviling society at the local and national level are no myth. Almost everything in society seems to be going wrong. The problems range from poverty (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), poor governance and economic management, corruption and embezzlement of public funds (Olarinmoye, 2011), unemployment rate is on the increase, scarcity of key factors of production is being experienced the world over while there is inequitable resource distribution (elite capture) as well as social tensions and fragmentation (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Olarinmoye, 2011). At the epitome of the global economic crisis is the liquidity crunch which is evident to all. That, religion is a panacea to these socio-economic problems is debatable as various scholars have

written widely on this area with varying views and perceptions of the nexus and impacts of religion on socio economic development. It is however interesting to note that scholars of recent times have come to appreciate the significant role of religion in sustaining socio-economic development (Eum, 2011; Anderson, 1988).

Religion and socio economic development

Durkheim (1915) defines religion as a system of beliefs, values and practices concerning sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them. He further argues that religion is about community: it binds people together (social cohesion) and offers strength for people during life's transactions and tragedies (meaning and purpose). Following Iannaccone (1998) the term religion is used to mean any shared set of beliefs, activities and institutions premised upon faith in supernatural force. Religion forms and is at the core of normative meaning that form the basis of social institutions. Its exclusion in analysis of progress and development of people results in defective results. Max Stackhouse (2009) concurs with this in that "the neglect of religion as an ordering, uniting and dividing factor in a number of influential interpretations of globalization is a major cause of misunderstanding and a studied blindness regarding what is going on in the world."

In *Religion and Development*, "religion is referred to as an omnipresent and seamless part of daily life, taking an infinite variety of forms that are part of the distinctive quality of each community. Religion could thus not be seen as something apart and personal. It is, rather, a dimension of life that suffuses whatever people do. Religion has an effect on many people's attitudes to everything, including such matters as savings, investment and a host of economic decisions. It influences area we had come to see as vital for successful development....in short religion could be an important driver of change, even as it could be a break to progress."

Religion then is that element of human life which guides his action and compels him to do good, distinguishing between wrong and right. It is that which acts as a constitution for the believers who strive to adhere to the teaching and content of that which connects the spiritual and the existing world. Religion acknowledges the existence of The Most High who has power over all

forms of life and sustains man as well as grants favors and blessings in adversities. Thus religion shall mean any beliefs and shared values and practices that acknowledge the existence of God, spiritual world, upholds morality and encourages man to act rationally, as well as those activities and institutions hinged on faith in spiritual powers of God. This will include Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and African Traditional Religion among others. Whatever religion is, I believe it should be relevant and consider all kinds of people (poor, rich, widows, orphans, etc), all the aspects of life (socio-economic, health, etc) and relate to social and public practices (norms and values).

Religion, sustainability and socio-economic development

In the Brutland Report sustainable development refers to development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Sustainable development is therefore the darling of every community and society across the globe, yet its attainment is never an easy task. Three pillars (social, economic and environment) work in unison and support sustainable development. Efforts to attain sustained socio-economic development are often futile due to incompatible approaches that are used by development agencies and policy makers. *ZIMASSET* is such an example of a socio-economic development programme that fails to incorporate religious values yet its goals are yet to be realized. Societal justice and equity together with economic well-being and poverty reduction should not be compromised in the quest for sustainable socio-economic development. It is crystal clear that if meaningful sustainable development is to be achieved, there is need to integrate religious values which often determine human behavior and uphold social morality and cohesion (Durkheim, 1915; Ogbonnaya, undated).

Religion shapes the social pillar into one that is development friendly and provides an environment that is just and allows various players and members to relate and combine their efforts in trying to realize sustained development goals. Religion on the other hand has a positive correlation with the economy due to a number of ways as shall be discussed in this paper. From this analysis, it is imperative that religion can be a pathway to sustainable development as it directly or indirectly affects the economy and social well-being in a positive way in most cases though there may be some problems associated with religion in socio-economic development.

These problems often result from religious extremists and intolerance which then results in members making irrational decisions and actions to the detriment of socio-economic development. Ogbonnaya (undated) acknowledges that religion in Africa may stifle sustainable development but argues that despite this, there is remarkable contribution to sustainable development resulting from religion.

Religion and Society

Durkheim (1915) provides much insight on the role of religion in reinforcing social unity and stability. He argues that social unity and stability is attained in at least two ways: religion gives people a common set of beliefs and thus is an important agent of socialization and also the communal practice of religion brings people together physically, facilitates their communication and social intercourse which ultimately strengthens their social bondage. This fact cannot be overlooked since societal advancement depends on cooperation among societal members. Religion is therefore the glue that keeps society intact and ensures that members strive towards one goal and this also makes collective action easier to ensure due to the unity, stability and unison borne from religious harmony.

Religion is an agent of social control and thus strengthens social order. In Judeo-Christian tradition the Ten Commandments are a good example of how religion through religious texts helps in teaching people moral behavior and thus helps them learn how to be good members of society (Moberg, 2008). Religion breeds patience and tolerance in people who will behave responsibly and restrain from social injustices and irrationality. It is therefore undeniable that religion crafts social values which then act as the binding law enforcing morality in a community. Homosexuality and lesbian is fast becoming a social ill in some parts of the world, yet the practice of such shameless societal acts remains alien in most religious communities due to its castigation in religious scriptures. Engendering religion in socio-economic development therefore results in attainment of development goals without much social resistance as long as the development goals conform to the shared religious values.

The role of religion in motivating people to work for positive social change cannot be understated. The Southern civil rights movement a few decades ago owes much of its success to

religion which played a central role in its development. Religious beliefs motivated Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists to risk their lives to desegregate the South. Black churches in the South also served as settings in which the civil rights movement held meetings, recruited new members, and raised money (Morris, 1984). According to Makari, C (2009) the revolution in Iran championed by Imam Khomeini signifies how religion is instrumental in transforming society. Islam was used in this country to unite people and act as a weapon for transforming Iranian community. Religion therefore can act as a powerful voice which is readily heard and accepted by members due to its normative integration. Attempts to transform society and possibly introduce socio-economic development policies and programs have to consider religion as it is more legitimate than most organizations. Due to the moral influence of religious leaders, they are best placed as influential figures in society through which dialogue can be fostered as well as setting priorities for community members based on the teachings of morality and justice (BBC Press Office, 2005).

Religion on the other hand also helps in providing social services to the poor and marginalized or to all citizens when state institutions fail. Most orphanages, old people's homes, schools and hospitals are owned and run by religion organizations and help to provide much needed social services such as health care, education and food and shelter to the needy and less privileged members of the community. However the numbers of hospitals and schools, faith institutions operate including orphanages and old people's homes is very large. Some estimates put the share of faith run hospitals in Africa at over fifty percent Marshall (2005). Religion often inspires individuals to set up such social service providing structures. Mother Teresa is one good example of how religion inspires one to set up orphanages, old people's homes and schools to help the poor.

Religion and Economic well-being

All major religious traditions acknowledge the importance of addressing and alleviating the plight of the vulnerable individuals and societies. Distribution of wealth and income is practiced in different ways in different religions but all religions acknowledge the relevance of this as tithe,

alms giving and zakat sustains the poor. In Islam social justice is a corner stone of the faith. *Zakat and Sadaqa'h* are intended to bridge the gap between the affluent and needy thereby promoting a more just society (Baqir al-Sadr, 1993). The Qur'an considers charity as one of the most virtuous deeds because it challenges social inequalities (Mamoun and Phillips 2009). In Judaism, the obligation to care for those plagued in poverty is found throughout the Torah, with special reference made to orphans and widows. *Tikkunolam* "the repair of the world" has come to refer to Jewish social justice which is concerned with making a society as a whole not only fair and equitable, but also supportive and as much as possible ideal (Wright, 2011). In Christianity tithe giving and charity are highly regarded. Funds collected are used to address the plights of the poor with widows and women being given much preference as they are the most vulnerable groups in terms of securing their livelihoods. It is crystal clear that religion seeks to address the question of resources allocation to promote equity and justice so that poverty is eradicated.

Max Weber famously argued that religion has played a major role in the development of European economies. He outlines how the Protestants were more inclined to business pursuits and achieved greater economic prosperity during the early 1990s. Weber (1930) claimed that reformed Protestantism, promoted greater economic growth through nurturing stronger preferences for hard work and thriftiness. The Protestants emphasized much on literacy among the followers so as to encourage bible readership. This resulted in the growth of education which automatically translated into better jobs for the followers.

Since religions have had an inherent influence on promoting education as is evident from the various religious teachings. The first verse of the *Qur'an* (verse 1 of Chapter 96) revealed to Prophet Muhammad was based on the theme of reading while knowledge seeking also forms the hallmark of Islam. The bible in many places acknowledges the merits of wisdom and value of education. Thus, education positively impacts socio-economic well-being in several ways. Mainstream economic theory emphasizes the skill acquisition or human capital formation role of education, by which an individual's natural skills and abilities are developed and subsequently rewarded in the market place. Education is viewed as the great leveler, a key component of the "equal opportunity" underlying the ideal picture of the marketplace. Any coherent development

strategy must have an educational component to encourage and enable poor populations to improve their skills and their income-generating ability.

Even though making profit from business is acceptable; however, the accumulation of profit without utilization for the betterment of the society is prohibited (Badir al-Sadr, 1993). This moral and social obligation is stated in the Verse 19 of Chapter 51 of the *Qur'an*: “*And in their wealth and possessions (was remembered) the right of the needy, Him who asked, and him who (for some reasons) was prevented.*” Because of this revelation, Islamic banks are expected to be more sensitive to the needs of society, promote more welfare programs and activities, and make more contributions towards the needy and the poor (Haron and Shanmugam, 1997:35). This is clearly corporate social responsibility which is being advocated for in the recent millennia by governments and policy makers in the South yet religion has long acknowledged the need for corporates to alleviate socio-economic injustices through their operational profits.

Religion also helps in reducing uncertainty and improving economic efficiency through the extra-legal means which means that the religious teachings and values are regarded as social control mechanisms which regulate business behavior and ethics. Since religion is normative, it becomes more legitimate in addressing some market forces which therefore promote efficiency in that an economic system based on religion has limited flaws, rules and laws are consistent and this reduces incidences of uncertainty which may deter investment. Chapter 83 of the *Qur'an* (*Those who deal in fraud*) forms the basis of ethical conduct in business dealings which gives assurance and confidence in the economic environment.

Religion is responsible in some cases for the provision of development loans especially to enhance development projects. Scholarships are also offered to religious members at various levels of education. Scholarships usually go a long way in addressing the needs of the poor who would otherwise not be able to afford the opportunity to pursue their dreams and become self-sufficient in the long run and also contribute to the GDP. Many times development efforts are stalled due to a lack of funds to execute key development projects. Development funds availed to

the youth enables them to undertake development projects that contribute to meaningful socio-economic development (Candland, 2000).

All religions emphasize hard work among members. Sustained economic development can only be achieved by hard workers and entrepreneurs. Hard work and self-sustenance help in the mobilization of factors of production and innovativeness which will ultimately result in increased productivity and effective utilization of all the factors of production. Religion has also been found to have a large impact on wealth, both directly, by defining worthwhile objectives (oriented to this world and/or the afterlife) and providing tools for the development of savings and investment strategies, and indirectly, through its effects on education and labor supply behavior (Keister 2003, 2005). On this note religion helps to shape human behavior in the work place into one of hardworking driving the economy to great heights unlike situations wherein the workers are self-centered and give little regard to the overall production.

Discussion

The foregoing paragraphs suggest that religion is a building block of socio-economic development. Often discussions on socio-economic development seem to cast a blind eye on religion, sidelining it, yet, it is an intrinsic part of the seemingly complex and scientific process. Thus, religion should be at the fore of socio-economic development policies and programs since it offers opportunities for social networking, social control and promote social stability. Building on arguments posited by Durkheim (1915) and Weber (1930) religion thus constitutes the life blood of sustained socio-economic development due to its normativeness and the way it upholds morality, justice and ethical behavior and conduct among individuals and communities.

It is an undeniable fact that social values are best shaped through religion. Religion promotes responsible behavior that respects the dignity and sanctity of all life. Once religious values are inculcated in the socio-economic development framework of a community, there is a high propensity of morality and dignity associated with the community. Islamic Republic of Iran epitomizes the functionality of embracing religion in socio-economic development with remarkable results being achieved.

Lessons from theory

Five lessons can be drawn from the paper. The first is that sustained socio-economic development is enhanced by a system that recognizes and includes religion as the ingredient towards development goals. Second lesson is that religion is all-embracing and addresses almost all the aspects of man's daily life which mean that it is imperative to include religion in socio-economic development since religion has a package which also focuses on socio-economic development, hence the need to unravel those aspects of religion that link up with the socio-economic development aspects. The third lesson is that the integration of religion in the realm of society helps to promote social stability, social cohesion as well as social justice. Religion it has been found creates opportunities for social interaction and also provide social support and social networking. Fourth lesson is that religion promotes economic well-being in society through promoting hard work, thriftiness and business ethics that are conducive for sustained economic development. An economic system found on religious teachings and practices has a lot of potential to excel since people place much confidence in it. Lastly is the fact that, religion through religious leaders and institutions effectively acts as echo chambers since people often recognize the voice of religious leaders more than any other in society. To this end religion has to be used as a pathway in instances where social transformation is required or when the community is adamant to social change.

Recommendations

- Religions should be integrated into the development agenda as educators to contribute to the socio-economic development of society and communities at various levels;
- Since religions are more legitimate due to their normative integration, they have to be made echo chambers which will be used to communicate to the masses and fight corruption and socio-economic injustices and problems;
- Monitor and evaluate religious institutions so as to facilitate their role in socio-economic development and ensure that they are pro socio-economic development;

- Capacitate religious institutions and organizations so as to enable them to effectively execute their socio-economic functions since they have the potential to effectively deliver sustained results and development goals;

Conclusion

That religion can be involved in influencing the progress of the global economy as well as the social well-being is undeniable based on the above discussion. Through a number of factors and innumerable virtues there is a close link between religion and socio-economic development which then places religion at the apex of sustainable socio-economic development. Religion enhances collective action and allows for equitable distribution of social goods and services; employment rate is promoted since religion upholds hard work and promotes education which is a pathway to a sustained employment through higher literacy rates. Self-sustenance and entrepreneurship skills which enhances employment prospects are advocated for in most religious teachings as well. In light of these arguments, it is recommended that religion has to be embraced and integrated in socio-economic policies and programs at the local, national and international level if any meaningful development is to be achieved.

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