

# Poverty, Wealth and the Church in the Developing Countries

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We are all very aware of the glaring inequalities that exist between the rich and the poor countries of the world, and of the cries for help (usually in the form of financial aid) that come from every side. One thing that is overlooked, either because we feel that we can do nothing about it, because we are too diplomatic, because we do not want to meddle in the internal politics of nation states, because we ourselves are hardly an example, or because we are in fact profiting from the situation, is the growing imbalance of wealth inside many of the countries in Africa today. The fact that we feel we can do nothing, or do not want to do anything has helped to hide the situation, to relegate it to a limbo. Very often we just do not want to talk about it. And yet there can be no hope of development if this very basic problem is not tackled.

That it exists is evident to anyone who has ever worked in Africa. The usual dichotomy is between rural and urban areas, wealth accumulates in the cities and not in the rural areas, although at times up to 95% of the population live in the countryside and provides the nation's wealth. The cities give the impression of a progressive, intense and thrusting development, the rural areas appear to be stagnant or even regressing.

And yet to portray the problem in these terms is only to tell half the truth; there is a mixture of poverty and wealth in both urban and rural areas. Each African country has at least one show-piece of a city; tall buildings, offices, apartments, or hotels. There are flyovers, underpasses, or freeways; elegant shopping centres dot the town which is no doubt surrounded by affluent suburbs. Yet the lifts are often out of order and you have to climb twenty very sweaty flights to the executive offices at the top. The traffic lights don't work, and the streets are congested with a variety of ramshackle vehicles. The sanitation is primitive or just does not work, if it exists at all. More startling, however, are the rapidly growing shanty towns, a euphemism for the most squalid of slums, where thousands may share a single water-tap, the drainage is an open sewer running down the middle of unpaved streets, and in the rains the whole place is one fetid quagmire. No one, least of all the government, seems to care. Now and again the police or army are sent to clear the area, drive out the people and knock down the shacks

made from paper and flattened kerosene tins. The operation is usually termed "resettling the people in the rural areas". The army returns to barracks, the people from hiding, the slum is as bad as ever, a breeding ground for disease, violence and crime. The only ones to have profited are the army, who have been able to throw their weight around, the newspapers who have got a story and the politicians who, having paid lip service to rural development, make speeches and retire to their exclusive clubs.

The rural areas are typified by "isles of wealth in seas of poverty". Agriculture can be big business and a few huge farms are growing up owned by wealthy professionals, doctors, lawyers, politicians, army officers (who earn their sometimes ill-gotten gains in the cities) or minor civil servants, teachers, vets etc. all of whom have "jobs". Then there are the big multi-nationals with their huge coffee, tea or sugar estates, paying their workers a pittance, but charging the housewife over here an ever increasing fortune.

At the same time in the "seas of poverty" the millions of largely illiterate peasants plod on. Attempts are made from time to time to educate them, develop them, browbeat them into more and better agricultural production, usually of cash crops for export to the town or even abroad. But the poverty has remained resistant, and attitudes intractable. Nothing seems to work and the peasants grow more cynical and hostile to the Central Government and its agents. They are fed up with being dictated and preached to and disillusioned with the dream of economic wealth which each year seems to grow dimmer and dimmer as the prices for their crops diminish, and prices soar for the bare essentials of life (if they are available on the open market, which usually they are not.)

When independence dawned most African countries were ruled by a combination of three groups. First there were the colonial officials many of whom stayed on to help. Then there was the group composed of the country's businessmen, usually these were neither Europeans nor Africans. In East Africa for example, they were Asian, in Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi, Greeks, in much of West Africa they were Levantines. Finally there were the politicians, the *nouveau riches* African elite.

Few countries had a currency that was worth much on the international market, or so they were told. If they wanted to trade abroad, they would have to earn hard currency as Foreign Exchange. The way to do this was to produce as much in the way of cash crops as possible and sell them. This was the role of the peasant farmer. He would sell the crop to the businessman who would arrange, together with the Government, for its sale abroad, usually back to the former colonial masters who of course set the price both for the goods bought and the goods they would sell. In return for this the Government and the businessmen received the Foreign Exchange.

What did they do with it? First of all development had to be

paid for; development aid is not free. It has to be paid back with interest. Thus the offices, apartments, roads, shops, suburbs all had to be financed. Secondly, the affluent classes had to be catered for, the Europeans, the Businessmen, and the new African Elite. Their standards had to be maintained and improved, expensive houses, furnishings, clothes, cars, jewellery etc. Last of all came the rural dwellers, the peasant farmers. Some money had to be invested in them if they were to go on producing the goods to keep the others happy. So at least something filtered back to them, if not very much.

Gradually the colonial officials moved out as did the businessmen usually ousted by the growing class of wealthy Africans who aspired to take their place by the shortest cut possible. Rather than decrease the spending on affluence and promote the interests of their own people, they took care first and foremost of themselves, their families, friends and hangers-on. There are even cases where Governments which had a conscience, and tried to remedy the situation in favour of the rural masses (Milton Obote of Uganda, for example), were ousted by a military coup.

Today, however, most African countries are ruled by military juntas whose particular form of affluence, bigger armies and military hardware is even more expensive than the civilian affluence which they want to keep up as well. As a result there is even less money to be spent in the rural areas. Transport needed to bring in essential supplies and bring out the crops is diverted for military or private use. Money needed to finance the agricultural infrastructure, seeds, fertilisers, credits, equipment now buys bullets and cosmetics. Roads simply disappear into the bush. For the peasant, it is back to subsistence living, food to eat, booze to drink. There will be no money for new clothes (they are too expensive on the black market anyway). There is no soap (hence a rise in skin disease, ringworm, tinia etc.); no salt, no sugar, no matches, no batteries for their radios (therefore at least peace from their prattling leaders); no kerosene for their lamps, all things which had become part and parcel of everyday living. Taxes will not be paid. There will be no money for school fees; no improvements on the farm. Eventually there will no longer be any cash crops to provide the money to support the growing appetite for civilian or military affluence.

By this time there will be a complete collapse of the local currency. Goods will be available only on the black market at ten times or more, the controlled price. There will be serious outbreaks of crime, usually violent crime, often organised in order to steal spare parts necessary to keep the Mercedes, the Volvos and the Peugeots running. There will be starvation in the towns, and finally (what for many years people had been striving for) a movement back to the rural areas by the urban population, but hardly for the right reasons. Greed and avarice will take over from hospitality and cooperation. Every little service will have to be paid for through graft and

corruption, perhaps a few pence at first, at the lowest levels, reaching into thousands of pounds the higher you go up the scale, payable of course into a numbered Swiss bank account.

All that I have said would seem to support the view one hears voiced so often nowadays, "We gave them Independence before they were ready for it!" I disassociate myself completely from such a view: we should never have been there in the first place. The fault lies in the development strategy that we taught them, based upon private capitalism gone wild. A few learned the lesson that we taught them only too well, and have carried it to an extreme. The whole situation is a travesty of our own "Be like us" development attitudes of the '60's. It is not surprising that in country after country up and down Africa, reformist movements are looking to the socialist or communist worlds for a lead in re-establishing a development ideology free from corruption and giving rural development the primary place. Meanwhile, some of Africa's most corrupt leaders and governments remain our "good friends" and with whose countries we have "special relationships".

One wonders, however, whether the poor peasant will fare any better under a totalitarian regime than he did under a grasping, capitalist one. But it is interesting, that those who talk most about the needs of the people generally draw their inspiration from the communist world and not from the west. And it is even more interesting to note that in countries like Mozambique Christianity along with capitalism has taken a battering, although on the other hand, Nyerere of Tanzania remains a convinced and committed Christian. (Church bashing is not, moreover the monopoly of the left; the right-wing regime in Rhodesia is doing its share). Nyerere appears to be inspired to a certain extent by China and its rural reconstruction, while Machel in Mozambique is, strangely enough, inspired more by industrialised Russia, hardly a paradigm for so rural a country.

When asked "Toward what kind of socialism are you moving?"<sup>1</sup> Machel answered:

" . . . there is only one socialism which responds to the needs of the people, a system which allows the social and economic development of the country, a system which permits an equitable distribution of the nation's wealth to all sectors of society."

To this, one rightly asks "the needs of the people as seen by whom? the people themselves, or as interpreted by the Party to suit the Party's doctrine? Secondly, socialist systems appear to be highly centralised, whereas people like Machel are in fact calling for quite the opposite, a system that demands a great deal of decentralisation, local initiative and local control.

One might well turn upon the capitalist and communist or any other "ist" and say "a plague on all your houses". But then where would that leave us? What would be the alternative? Is there in fact

<sup>1</sup>*African Development*. Feb. 1976, p. 131.

anything else? Paolo Freire suggests:

“The correct method for a revolutionary leadership to employ in the task of liberation is, therefore, not ‘liberation propaganda’. Nor can the leadership merely ‘implant’ in the oppressed a belief in freedom, thus thinking to win their trust. The correct method lies in dialogue. The conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership but the result of their own conscientisation.”<sup>2</sup>

What this means is that you’ll get nowhere preaching freedom, nor can you sell it, nor can you force it upon people out of the barrel of a gun. Freedom, liberation, salvation, development, call it what you like, will only come as communities are allowed and helped to identify and define their own needs and are given the opportunity to respond to them on their own initiative and under their own control. Capitalists won’t allow this because it might hurt their profits and challenge their ownership of society. The Communists won’t allow this because they are too busy foisting their own pre-conceived notions on the people.

Thus even if the East or West were able to give up the ideological struggle that they are fighting against one another in Africa, (one which the West appears to be losing in any case) and were convinced that the only way to development were through rural reconstruction, in the way mentioned above, they would still be hindered by the Governments in power in the majority of those countries. The ruling dictatorships or oligarchies of the African continent are often their own citizens’ worst enemies. As East and West continue to vie with one another for influence with Governments, the rural masses continue to suffer.

This is where the Church could play a very important role if she so wished or could be given a chance. But the Church would first of all have to overcome a number of obstacles. Not the least of these would be the attitudes and consequently the ensuing behavioural patterns acquired by centuries of authoritarian and paternalist rule. It is difficult, humanly speaking, and especially from the point of view of his background and formation, for a clergyman, who in comparison with the illiterate peasants among whom he is working has to be considered very highly educated, to refrain from rushing in and responding to the people’s needs as he sees them himself, and as he thinks fit.

The missionary clergy in Africa come either from a European bourgeois background or from rabidly capitalist North America, particularly Canada, and of course are very much affected by this background. They favour a greater distribution of wealth in what has come to be termed the “North-South Dialogue” but they are strangely silent about or even adverse to a greater distribution of

<sup>2</sup>Paolo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin Books, 1972. p. 42.

wealth inside their countries of origin. This would put them into direct confrontation with their families, friends, Governments and even hierarchies. Similarly, they are just as slow to call for a greater distribution of wealth in the countries in which they work. On the contrary, they are likely to point to some outstanding and wealthy member of their own religious affiliation as a model of what can be achieved in so little time, under their guidance, and by dint of hard work.

But there is still another and perhaps a graver obstacle coming from the life-style of the institutional Church itself. Bishops cannot talk of distributing wealth if they continue to live in veritable palaces or ride around in cars which would take the ordinary peasant several hundred years of saving to buy. One can hardly aspire to be of service to the rural masses if one is trained and served hand and foot in one of the architecturally most exotic buildings of the city. Under such conditions ideals of service are so much hot air.

By their geographical distribution throughout the rural areas, by the length of time they spend there, living with the people at grass roots level, sharing their lives and language, and by the position of respect and trust that they hold, there can be no doubt that the missionaries or clergymen in rural Africa, are in a position to come to the aid of the rural masses. It is not for nothing that they are sometimes killed or expelled by groups jealous of their position and their influence. It is understandable that someone like Nyerere feels that he has to have the clergy on his side if he is to accomplish his ideal of rural development.

There is however, a word of warning:

“Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.”<sup>3</sup>

These are not the words of a mystic writing to a religious or missionary community, but those of an educator, for in the last analysis, liberation, salvation, or development is an educational process. Probably the only group left that could carry this out in rural Africa is the Church, but first, the Church will have to re-educate herself.

<sup>3</sup>id. p.37.