

Theological Framework of the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa

This paper sketches a biblical-theological framework for the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa to establish a position to act against all forms of poverty in Africa. It outlines four main areas based on theological and confessional pillars of the church and gives legitimacy to the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa to actively participate in improving social and sustainable livelihoods in Africa.

Therefore, the objectives of the LWF Task Force on Poverty and Mission of the Church in Africa are (a) to actively involve itself in establishing just states and economies, (b) to engage in climate change mitigation, (c) to promote the synergy of theoretical and practical education for the improvement of the living standards of people, and (d) to participate in physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual healing of people suffering from all sorts of diseases and also to prevent pandemics, especially HIV/AIDS.

Building just states and economies in Africa

The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa identifies itself with the suffering of the people of Africa caused by abject poverty and feels responsible and obliged to play its role to empower the African communities to become more responsible for the sustenance of their lives. The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa believes that opportunities for livelihoods can only be promoted if African states and their economies are valuing and supporting good governance and justice among the people (LWF, 2000; Mutiso-Mbinda, 1986; Mahali, 2006).

The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa draws its authority from biblical teaching whereby God secures justice and righteousness for the poor and miserable communities (Jer 22:3; Isa 5:16; Ps 9:8-9). God not only supplies the needy with temporal requirements, but also wants to create states and economies which can hinder oppression and exploitation (Ps 36:6; 143:11, Amos 7:2.5, Prov. 22:22-23, Mark 16:14-18 and John 10:10). God's righteousness, which is explicitly linked with his

covenantal trust and promise to preserve and transform the creation as indicated in the Old Testament and New Testament, provides an encouraging spirit for the Church in Africa to act promptly against all sorts of misery and injustices as a response to God's trusting us as the custodians of creation.

The efforts of the Lutheran World Federation Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa are also based on *Confessio Augustana* (Articles 3 and 4) where it states that the Lutheran worldwide church believes that God has reconciled and renewed the corrupt creation into a new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is through his mercy that human beings have a forum to participate in God's righteousness through the confession of their sins in order to acquire God's forgiveness bestowed on us through Jesus Christ. Through taking part in the fight against poverty, the church in Africa abides by these confessions by reinterpreting them in action so that they can make sense and become relevant to the African context (LWF, 2007).

There are states and economies in Africa which have created social and political problems resulting in hunger, poor shelter, poor basic health services, and lack of livelihood opportunities. Based on her liberative theological paradigms given in the Bible and her theological confessions, the church in Africa believes strongly that it can play its role to mobilise and empower human and material resources for the eradication of ideological and material poverty through theological and practical processes (West, 1999).

Engagement in climate change mitigation

The serious threat of global climate change has a direct impact on Africa. The continent has for the past two centuries been a victim of the waves of colonialism, capitalism and the free market economy that have contributed to ecological crises in Africa and in the whole universe. The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa sees that the church is equally obliged to review her theological understanding of the relationship of human being and other creatures to the whole creation. The dominant biblical-theological understanding of the relationship of human beings to creation, which is much influenced by the notions of colonialism and (unsustainable) development

through exploitative and oppressive policies, is to be completely overhauled and replaced by Christian theology that is ecology friendly.

The affirmation of human being's dominion over creation as a God-given authority to human beings is an absolute misinterpretation. The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa says dominion of creation by human beings should always be understood in the context of stewardship and loyalty to God's kingdom (Gen 1:28, Gen 2:15). The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa understands that God commissions human beings to administer and service creation. Jesus restates God's involvement in taking care of creation, and this is made manifest in God's incarnation with creation as a reality and hence gives fresh meaning of God's love for humanity and creation (Mat 6:26-30, Joh 1:14, 3:16). Paul reaffirms the need to redeem the corrupted and imprisoned world by structural systems which do not seem to give chances for the world to be free from injustices (Rom 8:18-23). Therefore, based on these biblical-theological foundations, humans are responsible for the protection and maintenance of creation from degradation and destructive distribution.

The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa considers its call to be actively engaged in initiating various programmes and projects for the sustainability of God's creation. In this way the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa's theological reflections on climate change can find meaning and practical resonance in African communities and beyond.

Promotion of collaborative research for coining implementation of strategic developmental programmes for grassroots communities

Since creation God instructed human beings to take care of and protect creation (Gen 2:15). Based on this creation-theology educational institutions are founded by the church with the purpose of informing and empowering human beings with understanding and skills to live as custodians of lives and creation. Moreover, God instructs and teaches us ways in which a human being should have a three dimensional relationship, namely, God-human-creation (Psa 32:8). God instructs us to transmit cultural knowledge and values relating to our social and cultural relationships from one generation to the other for

the betterment and sustenance of the community (Deut 6:7; Mt 28:19-20). This background blesses the LWF Task Force on Poverty and Mission of the Church in Africa to see to it that participatory research on poverty related issues are conducted to give phenomenological and practical understanding of the causes of poverty in Africa.

Any country which has taken steps against poverty has used education as a tool. The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa believes that education in Africa should be transformed to meet the needs of fighting against poverty. The church has been in the forefront in establishing educational institutions to accommodate as many people as possible. However, it has been validated beyond doubt that many education systems in Africa do not provide education geared to making a person self-reliant and become aware of her or his right to live. Based on a theological understanding of education, the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa sees the need to put more emphasis on education. Any struggle against poverty should start with the establishment of effective school systems that provide equal opportunities to women and men to participate in the struggle against poverty.

Since the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa is founded on the belief of the priesthood of all believers, it therefore admits its role to advocate and promote participation of all congregants in the eradication of all sorts of poverty. Research by the Task Force on Poverty in Africa, therefore, is expected to be participatory and strategic to illuminate multi-factorial causes of poverty through which a sound implementation of the eradication of poverty is envisioned.

Through participatory research it will be easier to develop grounds for strategic action against discriminatory cultural values that tend to marginalize groups through gender and social status. Moreover, the direct involvement of congregants and other members of communities will help the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa identify cultural barriers that hinder the development and social prosperity of Africa. The baseline survey of socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural patterns that hinder progress in Africa will help the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa to have a comprehensive plan against hindrances to development in Africa.

Lastly, the aim of the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa's involvement in collaborative research is to link religious and sociological research by various educational institutions for a correct mapping of social problems and trends in Africa. This aims to bridge the gap between academicians and lay people in order to have a synergy between theoretical and practical social realities for effective developmental planning. The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa therefore has the responsibility to awaken research-oriented programmes on poverty in its already established institutions by promoting seminars, consultations, and workshops with the grassroots communities. The outcome of these "workshops" will also provide guiding indicators for disseminating the results of research in order to bring sound action against poverty.

Participation in prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases

The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa understands that poverty is a vicious circle of social and physical discrimination and psychological diseases. Poverty is regarded as a multi-factorial network of causes and effects that must be carefully studied and understood in order to have a viable and concrete plan for its eradication. Poverty and diseases become a hindrance to any development plans made by states in Africa. Thus, intervention against injustice and environmental degradation should go hand in hand with the healing and reconciliation of African communities from the suffering and misery caused by poverty and social isolation (Mar Smith & Meme, 2008).

Africa is suffering from human and environmental related diseases. One of the diseases that is threatening and costing the lives of many people is HIV/AIDS. It is believed that 67% of around 33 million people infected with HIV/AIDS worldwide in 2007 were from Sub-Saharan Africa (<http://www.afro.who.int>). Moreover, 75% of the deaths resulting from HIV/AIDS related diseases worldwide were from the same region. This rate of the spread of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa is alarming, and hence requires a combination of strategies to fight against this pandemic.

The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa believes that biblical-theological insights play an immense role in realizing the empowerment and

transformation of African communities from all sorts of diseases, including HIV/AIDS. The biblical healing miracles of Jesus Christ and by His followers through His name authenticate God's transforming power of the infected and the affected from all sorts of diseases (Mark 5:21-42, Acts 3:1-10). Moreover, the suffering and death of Jesus Christ provides a radical ground for the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa to have a comprehensive holistic action against diseases in Africa.

In order for real empowerment and transformation to take place, the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa regards a holistic programme against poverty and social ills as inevitable (Mungure, 2008). This will enable the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa to initiate preventive and educative measures against HIV/AIDS. The LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa will also be able to conscientize and mobilize local communities against socio-cultural practices that contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Through interacting with the communities, the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa will promote communal relations for the improvement of entrepreneurship skills for economic improvement and social security. And more importantly, the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa advocates human rights for all people, especially vulnerable groups including women, children and people with disabilities.

In fighting against HIV/AIDS and other diseases in a comprehensive manner, the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa will engage not only in healing individual bodies, but also the body of Christ, of which the church and the LWF Task Force on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa are part. In this way the prophetic role of the church and diaconal activities show the theological grounds to be relevant, and the programmes of healing and empowerment will find roots in African communities.

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