

Diagnosing the Origin of Poverty in Africa and the Way Out

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Abstract

This paper claims that the basic economic problem of Africa and Africans is the economic exploitation of the continent and her people by foreign powers aided by their African collaborators. The paper explains that this exploitation starts in the colonial era and is perpetrated then through unjust institutions established by colonial administrations. The exploitations have continued to this day through puppet governments that serve the interest of the West especially through lopsided trade agreements and economic policies that disfavour Africa. The result is not only that Africa is ranked the poorest continent in the world but is also seen in the level of poverty and underdevelopment ravaging the continent. In the

light of these, the paper recommends that application of Christian Social Teaching (CST) is necessary for understanding African economic exploitation and also in helping Africa to navigate away from poverty -currently the most fundamental problem of the continent – to prosperity.

Part One

Introduction

Scholars do not usually have much troubles proving or agreeing with one another that African is poor. Majority of authors do not even bother attempting to advance such proofs. They just take that Africa is poor as given which everybody understands. For example, the two Oxford leading academics, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in their world renowned book, *why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* categorically stated that: “If you...make a list of the poorest thirty countries in the world today, you will find almost all of them in sub-Saharan Africa.”¹ Similar portraits of Africa are painted without any serious justification in other renowned books, scholarly journals and especially in mainstream western media. And by and large, one can argue and rightly so that Africa is as poor as she is painted.

Problem begins however, when it comes to explaining why Africa is poor and how the continent can move from its current poverty to prosperity. Here opinions differ and ideas rival each other. Nevertheless, a summary of the basic answers offered to explain why African is poor can be placed into four categories. The first answer usually known as the geography hypothesis holds— depending on the version— that differences in wealth levels especially between Africa and other continents can be attributed to geographical differences. This common view is advocated by Montesquieu, all the way through the economist Jeffrey Sachs to the environmental Biologist Jared Diamond. Montesquieu’s version is based on the effect of climate on work

force and thought ability. While Sachs version is premised on tropical diseases and soil type, Diamond places the cause on the unequal distribution of domesticable plant and animal species along continental shelves. Whatever version the theory appears, the conclusion is the same: “temperate climates have a relative advantage over tropical and semi-tropical areas,”² therefore, Africa is poor because Africa is located in the tropic.

A second answer to why Africa is the poorest continent in the world is called the culture hypothesis. This hypothesis relates prosperity to cultural elements such as religion, nationalism, beliefs and ethics. Thus, African countries are poor according to the cultural hypothesis because Africans lack the proper work ethics possessed by rich western countries. Max Weber one of the advocates of the theory argues that the Protestant Reformation was why Europe had the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent distribution of prosperity in the Euro-Asian zone.³

The third answer explaining African poverty is called the ignorance hypothesis. This hypothesis held by most economists “asserts that Africa is poor because Africans or their leaders do not know how to make good policies required to make a country rich.”⁴ By extension, this means that to move from poverty to prosperity African leaders and policy makers should focus on the best use of their scarce resources to satisfy the social ends of their people.

The fourth theory known as the institutional hypothesis is the brain child of Acemoglu and Robinson. According to these renowned scholars, African poverty is not caused by geography, culture or ignorance but by institutional failures. In other words, the states in Africa are failing because of the exploitative colonial and post-colonial structures established by the continent’s colonial overlords.⁵

This paper to a large extent agrees with Acemoglu and Robinson that exploitative economic structures established and perpetuated by the West is the reason for African poverty. However, why Acemoglu and Robinson did not propose ways Africa can help herself or can be helped out of this situation, this paper believes and will argue that the application of Christian Social Teaching will help to appreciate and solve African problem of poverty.

The paper is divided into three parts. Part One lays the foundation and direction of the research. Part Two summaries the basic principles of Christian Social Teaching while Part Three analysis African problem of economic poverty within the vortex of Christian Social Teaching. The conclusion will summary the paper and makes recommendations.

Part Two

Christian Social Teaching

Scholars are relatively in consensus on the contents of Christian Social Teaching (CST). Based on this, we will just review the definition of a scholar believing that his idea summarises the positions of other scholars on the meanings of CST. The scholar we have chosen for this purpose is T. A. Klein. According to him CST is the sum total lessons from Scriptures (including the Ten Commandments as well as passages from both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible), papal encyclicals and other Vatican writings, documents prepared by Church Commissions and letters from national conference of bishops as applied to national concerns, social and political and social and economic concerns.⁶ However, Klein does not see CST as restricted only to these documents. In a broader sense, he thinks that CST also includes analysis of theologians, philosophers and subject matter experts (e. g. economists and social scientists) attempting to relate these problems to particular situations, times and places.

CST has been applied to a variety of social issues but our concern here is on its application to business practices particularly questions having marketing and developmental dimensions. It should also be pointed out that these CST lessons have both diagnostic and prescriptive content. In other words, CST addresses how a problem arises as well as what might be done about it that is in keeping with religious teachings. Of additional interest is the fact that CST has both macro and micro implications. That is, CST admonishes individuals and firms to adhere to its values but it also suggests general public policy approach for correcting deficiencies in the social and economic systems that influence processes at odd with those values.

The numerous sources of CST notwithstanding, the problem any researcher investigating it usually faces is how to streamline the contents. In this regard, a complete enumeration of CST theory can be found in Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church issued in 2005 by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*. The focus of the compendium is on seven issues, which will serve as our organizing platform for the enduring themes of CST in this research. These include: (1) life and dignity of the human person (2) call to family, community and participation (3) rights and responsibility (4) option for the poor and vulnerable (5) dignity of work and right of workers (6) solidarity (across national, racial and other differences) (7) care for God's creation.

In what follows we shall specifically examine the meaning and moral basis of these principles. In subsequent sections, we will investigate how the principles can be used to diagnose the exploitative bases of African poverty.

The Principles of Christian Social Teaching

Human Dignity

The most basic and fundamental instruction of CST flows from the idea that all persons (created in the image of God) have inherent worth regardless of colour, race or creed. Dignity is not earned but rather it is always a given right to be accorded to all persons in all circumstances. This principle is used to argue that “The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy” and that an excessive focus on profit maximization can be harmful to authentic personal development because reward and burden may not be justly distributed. The foundation of this principle is that people are ends and should never be used merely as means for some economic ends.

The Common Good

This principle is based on the Church’s call for family, community and participation of everyone in benefits of the commonwealth. From this also arises CST doctrine of the “universal destination of goods,”⁸ which implies that the good of the earth should be used for the benefit of all, not exclusively from an economic perspective, but from a balanced social, cultural, and community standpoint. Thus, why CST clearly affirms the right to private property, this teaching provides a foundation for the notion that “all persons have the right to secure the basic necessities of life.” Included here would not only be the right of all persons to food, but as Pope John XXIII puts it, “rights to shelter, and available work but also access to education and available healthcare.”⁹

Subsidiarity

This is one of the most basic articulations of rights and responsibilities inherent in CST. Pope Pius XI defines it as follows: “It is an injustice... to assign to a greater or higher association what a later or subordinate organization can do.”¹⁰ It grants that everyone as they are able needs to contribute as well as receive from the community. In this regard, the

American National Conference of Catholic Bishops states: “If able, all people have...a... duty to work and provide for their families.”¹¹

Commentators on this principle also imply that the concept warns about the dangers of overregulating business activities; however the same principle is used in CST to ensure that sufficient powerful parties weigh in to offset persistently unfair practises in society. The National Conference of American Catholic Bishops also maintains that: “Society has a moral obligation, including governmental action where necessary, to assure opportunities, meet basic human needs and pursue justice in economic life.”¹² While respectful that of the idea that the work of commerce in society is undertaken by the private sector with private property and rewards, this principle underscores the “integrative social contract” implication that businesses collectively must operate in public interest.¹³

Preferential Treatment for the Poor

This teaching recalls the Gospel admonition of Jesus to “Love thy neighbour” and what you do for the least of my brethren you do for me (Math 25: 35-46)” Here CST argues that the proper end of economic activities is the progress of the entire community, especially the poor.¹⁴ This centrality of the obligation to help the poor is manifest not only in CST but also in every religious doctrine—Jewish, Protestant, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist.

Workers’ Rights

This theme advanced the idea that work is central to human growth and workers help to continue the wonder of God’s creation. It is the oldest teaching of modern CST dicta, embodied in the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, published in 1891 and elaborated in *Laborem exercens* by Pope Paul II. These documents proclaim: “All people have the right

to economic initiative, to productive work, to just wages and benefits, to descent working conditions as well as to organize and join unions or other associations.”¹⁵ They grant workers the right to organize unions and suggest that duties to past loyalties by workers always need to be recognized. “Any business that does not enhance its workers and serve the common good is a moral failure no matter how healthy the bottomline.”¹⁶

Solidarity

This concept recognizes that all people and social groups are united in brotherhood that seeks common growth and fulfilment, in the debt of one another for support that the authors require in community. It provides a framework for the idea that: “...economic life should be shaped by moral principles”¹⁷, because all persons both seek and want a fair opportunity to attain betterment in their lives. This foundational theme in CST is the basis for advocating ethical responsibilities of rich nations to poor nations as well as the special ethical obligations of multinational businesses operating in the developing world.¹⁸ learning to practise the virtue of solidarity means learning “that loving one’s neighbour has global dimension in an independent world. As Pope John Paul II, defines it:

Solidarity then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortune of so many people both near and far. On the contrary it is a firm persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.”¹⁹

Stewardship

The principle of stewardship captures the responsibilities of every party—including corporations—to contribute to the care of the earth. It is among the newest in the evolution of CST. It calls for economic actions always to: “respect the integrity and cycle of nature” and to fastidiously avoid environmental exploitation.²⁰ It views the physical environment as a common pool of abundant resources not to be exploited to the benefit of only a few or at the expenses of future generation. However, it must be noted that this principle does not deify nature. In CST, nature is man’s garden to be protected and enriched as instrument of humanity but not given autonomous status.

Part Three

African Poverty in the Context of Christian Social Teaching

Recall that it has been observed above that CST is both diagnostic and prescriptive in its approach to problems. It has also been noted that the reasons for African poverty are many and varied. Therefore, in this section, we shall from the background of CST, underline some of the key reasons why Africa is poor.

Why is Africa Economically Poor?

Stand with Africa a document issued by the Catholic Archdioceses of Cincinnati gives the following summary of why Africa is poor:

Reasons for poverty and lack of development on the African continent are many. African economies are externally dependent as a result of European colonization. They are primarily rural and lack the capital and technical know-how to increase productivity and produce variety of goods. Further reasons include unjust trade and exchange rate policies, government

bureaucracy that waste time and resources, unfavourable economic and political relationships with foreign nations, ongoing exploitations of the continent's natural resources and political unrest.²¹

Through this information, one recognizes very quickly both the scope and complexity of the issues that faces most African nations. However, it must be asked how the situation got to where it is now. Why is the African continent the poorest in the world? The cause of African poverty has been identified as exploitation in the previous section; however, in line with the objective of this paper, the intention in this section is to highlight those processes that created the exploitative institutions or structures that kept Africa where it is today.

The Slave Trade

It is always difficult to address the issues of African poverty and exploitation without commenting on the slave trade. While lack of space in this paper will not allow a full account of what happened in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, nonetheless the unconscionable immorality of the practice within the context of CST has to be underscored. Thus, it must be said that in practicality, the practice drained Africa of the millions of the very people who could have built her up—the youngest, strongest and healthiest of her members. Another terrible consequence of the slave trade is that it introduced fraudulent business into Africa. With the emergence of the slave trade, Africans became ready to do anything, including selling their own kits and kin to make money. The very foundation of the strangulating hold of corruption on almost all African states can therefore be traced to this unwholesome trade brought upon Africans by Europeans.

The Colonial Legacy

Stand with Africa identifies colonialism as one of the processes that enthroned the exploitation of Africa. Accordingly, this document argued that the European colonizers exploited the people and resources of Africa for their own personal gain and the gain of their mother country. They seized the most fertile track of land and forced Africans into low paying labour jobs. The result of this practice is still seen today. The land is still controlled by few today keeping the poor labourers in poverty. *Stand with Africa* also documented that the colonizers reinforced the relegation of Africans to low paying manual labour jobs through high taxation and high prices for goods. Ensuring this poverty eroded the traditional social security system of the African tribe/family. The result of this today is that, there is no viable government's social security systems to take the place of traditional ones, as the emerging African governments were not prepared to deal with the people's social needs.²²

Acemoglu and Robinson in *Why Nations Fail* argue that in addition to this colonial structures and system that has kept Africa poor was the creation of cash-crop economies. This according to them was a situation some African countries were forced to produce usually one item of crop—something that could not be produced in the mother land of the colonial power such as cocoa. The problems with this practice which still exists today in parts of Africa are many. First, most of the crops planted in this manner are susceptible to diseases, draught and natural disasters. If the crops are destroyed, there is no income for the entire growing season. The result is hunger and famine, the reoccurring decimals in Africa states since independence. Also, by focusing on one crop, these countries are unable to produce varieties of items needed to feed their own people, thus creating further dependencies on the West. In addition, although various African countries produce different type of cash crops but the prices paid for these crops are determined by

outside buyers. African nations have little power to set up prices on the international market.²³

Post-colonial Period

African continent contains great natural resources such as gold, diamond and oil. However, these resources have generated protracted civil wars with foreign greed creating millions of deaths and refugees throughout the continent.

Furthermore, bad leadership is another reason why Africa is poor. When the colonial powers left Africa, they did so without leaving viable examples of self-rule for emerging African governments to follow. What the West did was to install their puppets in power resulting to what has come to be known in modern time as neo-colonialism, a system where an African government serves the interest of erstwhile colonial master instead of its citizens. These African governments are usually autocratic and depend on the military assistance of these foreign powers for their survival.

This system also encourages corruption in Africa. In the first place, Africa governments installed by foreign powers allow institutions and corporations of these Western governments to carry out their corrupt business practices in Africa without regulation. Secondly, many governments in Africa with authoritarian control steal state money for personal use because there is no system to hold them accountable. Thus as Anika Ngoro argues, "It is common knowledge that some African officials have kept stolen money in European banks. Yet there is no indication that the problem worries European governments. In addition to this, lower level of government services, salaries is so low and undependable that many African officials must resort to bribe for the survival of their families."²⁴

Foreign Debt and Structural Adjustment

To this point, this paper has been speaking of problems internal to Africa, but there are also important external reasons for poverty in Africa. A highly external factor is foreign debts. Most African countries are struggling under massive debts to many Western governments. These debts originates in the 1960s when European colonial powers left Africa and the emerging African governments needed capital to modernize their economies. Most current debts is the result of bad lending practices including lending to corrupt governments for political reasons, lending excessive amounts to government to expend bank surpluses and fend off financial crisis and lending to government without regard to their ability to repay. As *Stand with Africa* observes, “Many African countries have repaid their original debt amounts many times over but remain indebted due to unjust exorbitant interest rates.”²⁵

Inexorably linked with foreign debt is the practice of structural adjustment. These are programs of international lending institutions such as International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank (WB). These institutions require strict fiscal practices of indebted nations in an attempt to increase the countries abilities to repay their foreign debts. Unfortunately, these programs have been proven time and again not to work. In addition, they divert fund that are desperately needed for the social welfare of the citizens. Africans are literally dying to repay international debts. The most impoverished nations in Africa, currently pay more in debts services to rich creditors than they receive in new loans, aids and investments.

International Trade

The issues around international trade are complex. There exists an imbalance in world trade which is determined by the wealthy powerful nations of the West at the expense of the developing world. African nations have little power on the world trade markets. The opening of international trade in recent decades

has benefited already wealthy nations while further impoverishing people already living in poverty and suffering from hunger. People who could formerly ensure the survival of their families through hard work are working even harder but gaining less.

One major issue around international trade is that of subsidies. Rich nations spend just under 1 billion dollars a day on agriculture subsidies. Farmers in wealthy nations receive subsidies for their crops while farmers in poor countries struggle to make ends meet. Because of government subsidies, it is cheaper to buy a bag of American rice in Nigeria than a bag of rice produced locally. This, of course, puts rice farmers in Nigeria out of production and enriches the American economy. Cotton farmers in the U.S. receive \$4 billion a year in subsidies – a sum that exceeds the total national income of many African countries.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) was created in 1995 to “help trade flow as smoothly, predictable and freely as possible.” Their website²⁶ explains their efforts in administering trade agreements, acting as a forum for trade negotiations, settling trade disputes, assisting developing countries in trade policy issues, etc. But the many critics of the WTO argue that it places wealthy nations’ economic wants and goals over the needs of poorer nations’ citizens and environment. They also charge that the WTO is undemocratic and increases inequality as rich countries have more power in the actual operation of the WTO, not to mention the overwhelming impact of wealthy nations’ business corporations.

In *Africa Policy Outlook 2018* by Foreign Policy in Focus, it is noted, “In a very self-serving way, rich countries continue to argue that integrating developing countries into the global economy through trade and investment is a more effective and

sustainable way of reducing poverty than is aid or debt relief... (However,) African governments and civil society organizations claim that developing countries lose more in blocked access to rich countries' markets each year than they gain in aid."²⁷

The bottom line of this analysis is that the West's business attitude towards Africa is one based on exploitation and total disregards of the principles of CST. For example, in dealing with Africa both before and after colonization the West has not taken into consideration the fact of the dignity of Africans as people made in the image of God. The principle of the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, stewardship etc. are also not taken into cognizance. The ultimate motive of the West has been to rape Africa of her rich resources.

Christian Social Teaching and the Solution to African Economic Problems

Many scholars and researchers have suggested ways oppressed people can throw off the shackles of exploitation. For instance, Karl Marx in his dialectical materialism had suggested a revolution that will overthrow the exploitative class and usher in a classless society that will be free from oppression and exploitation. Following Marx, Franz Fanon called on Africans in his *The Wretched of the Earth* to confront Western exploitation of Africa headlong. Fanon believes that the process which brought in exploitation on Africans is force as such according to him only force can be used to end the exploitation. Contrary to this position, scholars and administrators such as Julius Nyerere have called for a total boycott of Western values, corporations and institutions. Africans, these nationalists argue should begin to look inward to discover those values that are inherently African before the unfortunate and devastating colonial encounter.

While appreciating the frame of mind that led scholars like Fanon and Nyerere to adopt these radical approaches as solutions to African problem of exploitation, it is imperative to observe that CST will not approve of the approaches. The reason CST will not approve these approaches is because it sees the world and all humanity as one big family created by the same God. In other words, CST will want to adopt an approach where everybody, including Africans and the West will have roles to play to solve the problem of economic misappropriation of Africa. We shall in the remaining part of this paper examine the possible solutions CST will offer to the problem of poverty in Africa.

Role of the West

In June 2005 the Finance Ministers of the wealthy G-8 countries met and formed a plan for debt reduction. This plan was endorsed by the G-8 leaders the following month. It cancelled 100% of the World Bank, IMF and African Development Fund debt of 18 countries – 14 of which are in Africa; allowing these funds to be used for health care, education and other development needs.²⁸

While this plan is an important start, it is crucial to remark that it does not go far enough. Firstly, the debt cancellation is conditional to countries implementing the economic measures of structural adjustment. Secondly, there are some 40+ other countries identified by those active in the debt cancellation movement that require 100% debt cancellation in order to have a good economic start. Thirdly, the G-8 plan does not address debt owed to institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank, the Asia Development Bank, bilateral and private creditors. It also does not address the problems of illegitimate debt – debt which is the result of funds stolen by corrupt regimes now being repaid by the citizens of these countries.

Consequently, Western efforts for economic justice for Africa need to be comprehensive. Following the principles of solidarity, common good and stewardship, Western governments should realize that helping to improve African economic situation is part of their responsibility. This is not simply because of the role they played in putting Africa where it is today but based on our common destiny as one big family.

In the West, the citizens have quite a remarkable control over their government. To this end, Western citizens who are aware of CST can bring pressure to bear on their governments to end neo-colonialism in Africa especially in the way many Western leaders still prop up African tyrannical leaders. Western citizens can also improve the situation by supporting and investing in those multinational companies and institutions that have track record of following the principles of CST in their business dealings in Africa.

Role of Africans

To begin with, Africans need to know that war is never a way to solve her economic problems. Every war fought on African soil gives the exploiters the opportunity to expand their exploitations and supply weapons to Africans to kill one another. This by now should be clear to Africans; Africa can never beat the West in war since the West is by far more advanced than Africa in war, especially in modern weaponization. Consequently, Africa needs to realize that it is more in its interest that it employs the principles of CST in searching for solution to her economic problems.

In the first place, there is need for Africans to understand and appreciate the work of those in the West who have been working tirelessly to see that the conditions of Africans improve economically. Very importantly, Africans should in the spirit of solidarity corporate with these like-minded Western partners to demand justice for Africa.

In addition, the root of African's economic problem is bad leadership because bad leaders sustain bad socio-economic institutions. Africans can improve on this by peacefully resisting imposition of leaders from the West. To say the least, this is not easy but it can be done by developing enlightened and strong civil society groups. These groups can organize themselves into strong unions and labour forces to strengthen democracy by ensuring that bad and tyrannical leaders are voted out of power. The likelihood that this approach will work has high probability because unlike the colonial era, the West no longer controls Africa directly. Rather they set Africans against Africans and take what they want while the war between Africans is going on.

Conclusion

We saw in this work that the primary cause of why Africa is the poorest continent in the world is her exploitation by Western powers. The study noted that the exploitation began with colonial governments who established institutions to exploit Africans both of their natural and human resources. One would expect that this exploitation would have ended with the end of colonialism but this did not happen. Rather, the exploitation reinvented itself in the form of neo-colonialism characterized by imbalance of trades, structural adjustment programs, etc.

After examining this in the light of CST, which recognizes the irreplaceable value of the human person and the corporate responsibility of all human beings on earth the study underscores that violence or withdrawal from the world as many have recommended are not the way to go in solving African economic problems. The paper recommends that eschewing violence of any form, unionism among Africans and working in concert with men of goodwill in the West are the

ways to help Africa navigate out of the excruciating poverty with the attended humiliation she has found herself.

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