

THE INTERSECTION OF CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND GOVERNMENTAL SOCIAL WELFARE IN ALLEVIATING POVERTY IN IGBO LAND

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Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection of Christian religion and social welfare in alleviating poverty in Igbo land. Poverty is a pervasive issue affecting the nation. Existing statistics shows that Nigeria is among the countries with the highest rate of poverty. As of 2022, the poverty rate was targeting 63% of its citizens and lots of efforts had been put in place by the government and the church in order to tackle the scourge of poverty in the society. The Catholic Church in particular, with its deep rooted presence in Igbo communities, had played a significant role in addressing socio-economic challenges through its charitable activities, education programs, healthcare services, and moral teachings while also government social welfare programs focus on formal structures of poverty alleviation, including policy initiatives, social interventions, and development projects. Analyzing the synergistic and independent efforts of these institutions, this research assessed the extent to which their collaboration could impact poverty alleviation outcomes. Using a mixed method approach that is both qualitative and quantitative, the research identified areas of success, existing gaps, and ways for more effective collaboration. An integrated approach between the Catholic Church and government welfare programs would create a more sustainable model for poverty alleviation in Igbo land which would address not only the immediate needs of the citizens but also long term plan of the nation in addressing societal issues including Poverty.

Keywords: Intersection, Christian Religion, Social Welfare, Poverty Alleviation, Igbo land.

Introduction

The pervasiveness of poverty has been one of the threatening social issues affecting Nigerians. According to the Bureau of statistics index on poverty 2022, 63% of Nigeria Population is living below the poverty line. Poverty is the state or condition in which one lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living. It connotes not having enough money to meet basic needs including food, clothing and shelter. The off shoot of the existence of poverty in the nation is felt not only by the citizens but also the government as it disrupts the smooth running of the society, creates fear in the mind of the citizens and increases most vices in the society. Some of the acts that indicates the prevalence of poverty in the society include robbery and stealing, unemployment, corruption, illiteracy, violence and the likes and this has become a clog to the development of the nation.

Research has shown that the root causes of poverty in the society are uneven distribution of resources and instability in the area of social and economic sector and this has however widened the gap between the rich and the poor by creating a marginalized class in the society, giving chances and power to the few rich to impoverish the poor in the society. The issue of poverty has been exacerbated that even with the abundance of oil in Nigeria as opined by Onah, Okwuosa and Uroko (2018) that, Nigeria the 10th largest producer of crude oil in the world and the sixth largest exporter among Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) s, in addition to other untapped solid mineral resources has retrogressed to become one of the 25 poorest countries in the world. Ekpe (2011) noted that the effects of this increased the insurgency and the migration of youth in the country. However there has been series of governmental policies through constitution making, administrative policies and political programs which aims to tackle this menace of poverty in the society but has not efficiently worked in the society due to the corruption, embezzlement and diversifications of resources meant for it. From the angle of Christian welfare group the Catholic Church in particular, limited funds, constraints and avoidance of dependence act has poised a challenge for the full utilization of their welfare packages.

It is on this ground that this study examines how a jointly poverty alleviation from the angle of an independent body in social welfare and Christian religious groups can help reduce poverty in the society especially in Igbo Land.

The Stance of Christian Religion in Igbo Land

The introduction of Christianity to Igbo land can be traced to 1857, when Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba convert, and Reverend John Christopher Taylor, an Igbo, arrived in Onitsha under the Church Missionary Society (CMS). According to Isichei (1976), they established the first Anglican mission station along the Niger River, which marked the beginning of missionary activities in the region. Roman Catholic missionaries, led by French priests from the Société des Missions Africaines, followed soon after according to Afigbo (1981) establishing their first station in Onitsha in 1885. Before the advent of Christianity, the Igbo people practiced a polytheistic traditional religion centered on the worship of deities like Ala (the earth goddess), Amadioha (the god of thunder), and ancestors. Kalu (2003) echoed that this has never been a swift ride that's why he averred that initial missionary efforts met with resistance due to the strong influence of Igbo traditional religion however, the gradual incorporation of education, healthcare, and trade by missionaries attracted many converts. By the early 20th century, Christianity had gained a significant foothold in the region, with a marked presence of Protestant and Catholic churches.

Nmah (2012) averred that the missionaries, through their teachings, condemned the belief held by the people as paganism, which caused conflicts. However, over time, many Igbo people began to incorporate elements of Christianity into their traditional practices, leading to a syncretic religious expression. Christianity challenged many Igbo customs, particularly those related to marriage, burial rites, and gender roles. Agha (1999) averred that Practices like polygamy and the osu caste system where some

individuals were considered social outcasts were denounced by missionaries as incompatible with Christian teachings. This led to a transformation in social structures, as the influence of Christianity gradually diminished these customs.

Today, Igbo land is predominantly Christian, with the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant denominations (including Anglican, Methodist, and Pentecostal churches) being the most widespread. According to Uzukwu (1996), the Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has had significant growth and influence, especially in educational and medical sectors, as well as in social development. In recent decades, Pentecostalism has emerged as a major force in Igbo Christianity. The Pentecostal movement, with its emphasis on personal salvation, divine healing, and prosperity gospel, has attracted many followers. According to Okorochoa (1994) this has led to the proliferation of independent churches and a shift away from the more traditional denominations, such as Anglicanism and Catholicism. Ilo (2011) contributes that Christianity in Igbo land has not only been a religious force but also a socio-political one. The church, particularly during the colonial and post-colonial periods, played an important role in shaping the political consciousness of the Igbo. Christian leaders often acted as intermediaries between the colonial authorities and the local populace. In the post-colonial era, the church became a platform for addressing issues such as corruption, social injustice, and poverty. In support, Achebe (2012) averred that during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), many Christian organizations provided humanitarian aid to the Igbo people, reinforcing the church's role as a socio-political force. The Christian faith became a source of solace and hope for many who suffered during the war. Even though, in the presence of all these roles, Nmah (2012) still maintained that despite its widespread acceptance, Christianity in Igbo land faces several challenges. One of the major issues is the tension between traditional beliefs and Christian teachings. Many Igbo Christians still practice elements of traditional religion, especially during cultural festivals, rites of passage, and ancestral veneration. This has created a form of religious duality, where individuals navigate between Christian and traditional practices.

Causes of Poverty in Igbo Land

One of the contributing factor of poverty in Igbo land has long be unemployment. Education has historically been seen as a path to upward mobility in Igbo land. However, there is a growing gap between the skills that the formal education system provides and the skills required in the job market. Many young graduates remain unemployed because they are not equipped with the technical and entrepreneurial skills necessary to thrive in Nigeria's economy. Eze and Nwosu (2019) argue that the current educational system in Igbo land does not align with the employment needs of the nation, thus increasing youth vulnerability to unemployment. In line with this, they argue that the education system in the region focuses heavily on academic degrees with little emphasis on vocational training or skills acquisition. This has led to an oversaturation of job seekers in sectors that are already congested, while sectors requiring skilled labor, such as technology, agriculture, and manufacturing, remain underutilized. This skills mismatch has

worsened the unemployment crisis, especially in urban areas like Enugu, and Onitsha, where youth migration is common according to Obasi & Ekenna (2020).

Also, the decline of the industrial and agricultural sectors, which previously served as the backbone of the Igbo economy, has also contributed to unemployment which in turn has caused an increase in the poverty rate. For decades, agriculture provided employment for many people in the rural parts of Igbo land. Madu (2020) aver that the agricultural sector has experienced a drastic decline due to a lack of investment in infrastructure, modern farming techniques, and incentives for young people to engage in farming. The collapse of manufacturing industries has led to the closure of many factories that previously provided employment. Industrial centers like Aba, once known for producing goods consumed across West Africa, have struggled to maintain relevance in a globalized economy. In the words of Obike (2021) he added that the erosion of these sectors has compounded unemployment, leading to widespread poverty. Rural-urban migration, driven by the search for better employment opportunities, has worsened unemployment in Igbo land. Many rural dwellers, especially the youth, migrate to cities like Enugu, Aba, and Owerri in hopes of finding jobs that are scarce. This influx has led to overpopulation in these urban centers, stretching the already inadequate infrastructure and social services. According to Anugwom (2017), this migration results in informal settlements and increased competition for limited job opportunities. The informal economy, which cannot absorb the increasing number of job seekers, becomes saturated, leaving many people unemployed and dependent on precarious jobs that pay subsistence wages. Sanusi (2013) added that, poverty in Nigeria is mostly in the rural and peri-urban areas, which is as a result of poor linkages to the urban sector, lack of access to productive input, environmental degradation, slow agricultural growth and poor infrastructural facilities This is why, Eze & Nwosu (2019) states that unemployment has deepened urban poverty and led to social issues such as crime and insecurity.

Catholic Church and Poverty Alleviation in Igbo Land

Among all the Christian religious groups, The Catholic Church has long played a vital role in poverty alleviation in Igbo Land. Through the lens of Christian social teaching, the Church has engaged in activities that not only provide immediate relief to the poor but also create sustainable pathways to prosperity. Onah et al (2018) averred that The Catholic Church in its social teachings states clearly that poverty is a threat to humanity; hence, it does not direct its teachings to only Catholics or Christians, but to every human being. One of the most significant ways the Catholic Church has contributed to poverty alleviation is through its focus on education. The establishment of mission schools has enabled thousands of individuals from poor backgrounds to receive quality education. According to Eze (2021), these schools have produced graduates who have gone on to occupy influential positions in various sectors, thus lifting families out of poverty. By providing scholarships to indigent students, the Church ensures that even the most vulnerable have access to education, a key tool for breaking the cycle of poverty. Uche (2015) added that these schools emphasize not only academic excellence but also moral and spiritual development.

The Catholic Church has also made significant strides in healthcare, establishing hospitals and clinics that offer affordable or free medical services to the poor. Obi (2020) averred that Institutions like St. Charles Borromeo Hospital in Onitsha and Madonna University Teaching Hospital have been instrumental in reducing mortality rates and improving health outcomes, especially for the rural poor. These healthcare services address a key dimension of poverty which is lack of access to quality health care which further prevents impoverished families from being burdened by medical bills. In line with this, Obinna (2020) added that the creation of mission health care of which Catholic Church has been in front is for the reduction of financial burden of medical expenses, this will make healthcare accessible to low income families in the nation. Nwachukwu (2018) hinted on the various outreach programs especially in remote areas to address common health issues such as malaria, HIV/AIDS and the likes, he furthered that through this program, the church provides not only medical treatment but also preventive care such as vaccination and health education. Okeke (2019) averred that the role played by Catholic Church towards alleviating poverty in the means of health care is enlarged, he outlined the visitation group to the sick in the hospital, the catholic pre natal and post natal care, the health awareness championed by them and the financial support to those unable to afford medical expenses. In recent years, the Catholic Church in Igbo Land has also embraced microfinance as a tool for economic empowerment. The Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria operates programs that provide small loans to women and youth, allowing them to start small businesses or improve existing ones. According to Okonkwo (2020), these microfinance programs have contributed to the economic stability of numerous families, as they have become self-reliant and less dependent on external aid. According to Alozie (2021), the Catholic Church also supports agricultural development as a means of reducing poverty in rural areas. For example, the Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the Catholic Diocese of Enugu runs agricultural training programs and provides farmers with the tools and seeds needed to improve food production.

Challenges Confronting Religious Institutions in Providing Social Welfare Packages in Igbo Land

Christian religious institutions have long been at the forefront of providing social welfare services to communities, often stepping in to fill gaps left by the state. However, in Igbo Land, these institutions face a myriad of challenges that hinders their ability to effectively deliver social welfare packages. According to Nwankwo (2020), the first primary obstacles that has hindered the effectiveness of poverty alleviation from the angle of the church to Igbo people is the limited financial resources available to many religious organizations.

Another significant challenge is the lack of adequate infrastructure and logistical support necessary for effective welfare distribution. Many rural areas in Igbo land suffer from poor road networks, unreliable electricity supply, and limited access to modern communication technologies, making it difficult for religious institutions to reach and assist those in need.

Constraints of Governmental Social Welfare

Governmental social welfare initiatives in Igbo land face numerous constraints, including corruption, underfunding, and poor policy implementation. Ebegebulem (2012) notes that corruption significantly undermines the success of welfare programs, with public officials mismanaging resources meant for poverty alleviation particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. It undermines the intended objectives of these initiatives, which are designed to improve the well-being of vulnerable populations. In the context of social welfare, Smith (2018) aver that corruption can manifest in various forms, including the misappropriation of funds, favoritism, and the lack of accountability mechanisms, which ultimately hinder the distribution of resources meant for poverty alleviation. According to Agbiboa (2012), In Nigeria, funds allocated to social welfare programs are often siphoned off by corrupt officials or misdirected to politically connected individuals, leaving the intended beneficiaries without adequate support. This mismanagement not only perpetuates poverty but also erodes public trust in governmental institutions, making it difficult to effectively implement social welfare policies. As such, anti-corruption measures are critical to ensuring the success of social welfare programs. Ezeh (2021) emphasizes that without a clear framework for execution, social welfare initiatives often fail to reach their intended beneficiaries. This is particularly evident in Nigeria, where overlapping responsibilities among various governmental agencies lead to confusion and delays in service delivery.

Moreover, the absence of well-defined protocols for implementing these programs creates an environment ripe for mismanagement and corruption, as resources can be easily diverted or wasted when there is no accountability. Another major constraint is the limited involvement of local communities in the design and execution of these welfare programs. According to Kalu (2008), the failure to engage local stakeholders results in a lack of ownership and sustainability. Political instability and insecurity in the region further complicate the execution of these initiatives. Ikejiaku (2009) explains that political unrest and the activities of separatist groups disrupt governance, making it difficult to implement welfare projects effectively. Political instability often leads to the disruption of essential services, including health care, education, and food distribution.

The Intersection of Christian Religion and Governmental Social Welfare in Alleviating Poverty In Igbo Land

The Catholic Church has a long-standing tradition of engaging in social welfare activities, a role that can complement governmental efforts in alleviating poverty in Igbo land. This intersection can be examined through various avenues, including healthcare, education and agricultural development. In health sector, The Catholic Church has been a significant provider of healthcare services in many parts of Nigeria, including Igbo land. According to Agholor (2019), the Catholic Church operates numerous hospitals, clinics, and health centers that cater to both urban and rural populations. These facilities often provide affordable or free medical services, which helps to address the healthcare needs of impoverished communities. Collaboration between the Church and government can enhance healthcare delivery by pooling resources, sharing expertise, and ensuring

broader coverage. As Onwuanibe (2021) notes, such partnerships can lead to improved health outcomes by filling gaps left by the public healthcare system, especially in remote areas.

Another angle has been the educational sector, Education is a powerful tool for poverty alleviation, and the Catholic Church has historically played a vital role in this sector. Catholic schools in Igbo land have been instrumental in providing quality education to children from low-income families. Ezimma (2018) highlights that these schools not only offer academic education but also instill moral values, which are essential for personal and societal development. Government collaboration with the Catholic Church in education can involve funding, training, and curriculum development to ensure that education is accessible to all. According to Nwosu (2020), such partnerships can lead to increased literacy rates, better job prospects, and overall economic development in Igbo land. Aside this also, Many communities in Igbo land rely on agriculture for their livelihood. The Catholic Church, through its social arms like Caritas, has initiated various agricultural programs aimed at improving food security and increasing farmers' incomes. Nduka (2017) points out that these programs often involve providing farmers with seeds, tools, and training on modern farming techniques.

The church intersecting with government agencies can amplify the impact of these initiatives. By aligning Church programs with government agricultural policies, there can be a more cohesive approach to tackling rural poverty. Joint efforts can lead to the development of sustainable agricultural practices and better market access for farmers, as suggested by Okoye (2019).

Conclusion

The findings of this research shows the role played by the Catholic Church and government welfare programs in combating poverty in Igbo land. While both entities have made notable contributions independently, the study reveals significant gaps in their efforts that hinder sustainable poverty alleviation. That's why it avail that the intersection of the Catholic Church and governmental social welfare in alleviating poverty in Igbo land is both necessary and beneficial. By leveraging their respective strengths, the Church and government can create a more comprehensive and effective approach to poverty alleviation. As the scholars cited have shown, such collaborations can enhance healthcare, education, agricultural development, advocacy, and microfinance efforts which will lead to sustainable development and improved living standards for the people of Igbo land.

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