

The Role of the Church in Anambra State in Promoting Decent Work and Economic Growth: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The study sets out to x-ray the past and the present contributions of the Church in the economic development of Anambra state. A holistic query into the historic development of the state and indeed many states of Nigeria points to the elaborate contributions of the Church. Decent work and economic growth as the focal of this research is fortunately the number eight in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Undoubtedly, this goal highlighted has tremendous impact and connection to some other goals for sustainable development even more so for Africa. This research is however poised to search out those areas that the Church has continued to reinforce and affect opportunity for work and positive economic growth. This clearly goes with emphasis on provision of alternatives for unemployment. The method of this qualitative research is historical and analytical as it considers those challenges mitigating expected result and growth. It identifies inadequate collaboration and partnership, corruption, decline in morality and insecurity as those obstacles. Findings showed that collaboration, integrative ethical education strategy, adequate funding as well as monitoring of these schemes and projects founded by the Church will improve the probability of the success.

Keywords: Church, Decent work, Economic growth and Development

Introduction

The church for many scholars simply refers to the “people of God”. The church over the centuries of its very inception has often find ways to penetrate the society and people it ever comes across. As a body and institution, it is much in the character of the church to leave an indelible impression on the community whom it has transverse. Same could be said of Anambra state and indeed Nigeria. The numerous impacts of the Church in Anambra however judged from perspectives is undeniable beneficial to the growth of the nation and that of the state. History recounts almost same of the reach and impact of the Church in many localities in Africa.

Despite the harsh critics of anti-colonial and Western encounter, the Church in many places in Africa remains a vital part of the people. The pace in development observable were first motivated, one could also say it is initiated by the many Christian missionary bodies that worked in Nigeria. Okpalike and Nwadiakor (2015) note that “Christian missionaries who had been active in Nigeria since the 1840s had encouraged their converts in the creation of a modern nation state that would take its place in the comity of nations” (p. 159). It is re-shaped to a great extent today what could call the Africa identity. Today many

discuss a possibility of African Christian theology, Christology, ethics, philosophy and host of other related subjects. The spread and influence of the church in Anambra is quite insurmountable. It may be difficult to foresee the state without any trace of the Church. Chukwudebelu, Ajakor and Nganwuchu (2023) aver that:

Throughout the nation's history, these Churches have demonstrably transcended the spiritual realm, actively shaping the country's political and social landscape. From advocating for independence from colonial rule to mobilize communities, to fight for human rights, Christian institutions have wielded significant influence (p. 31).

The role of the church in the context of this research is albeit not out of place in the general role of religion in any society. It may be difficult to distance religion from the politics of any given state. In agreement with Kukah (1993), Onuorah (2024) affirm that religion played and still plays ambivalent role in the growth, development and survival of the Nigerian nation. The electoral history and grass root politics of Nigeria reveals the influence of religion in determining the fate of the state. Anambra is no exception, undeniably one can connect political outplay and campaigns for votes with denominational bias. Hence the denominational dichotomy and prejudice has been exploited by some to gain political trust from the populace. Identifying these contributions and roles of the church in Anambra is important for gaining comprehensive understanding of their place and efforts. It is imperative to highlight these impacts and activities of the church that are tilted towards development of the state and the Nigerian society at large.

The study therefore investigates and clarifies the immense input of the church and also explains the obstacles and impediment to its altruistic pull in the state. The study provides valuable insights for the state stakeholders in their struggle for more development. Further the facilitation of developmental projects by the other religious and non-religious organizations hoping to make inroads in the state are also mentioned where need arise. Insights from the research will also enhance the spirit of collaboration from all and sundry.

The Concept of Church

According to Nmah (2012), the church is a community of saints, the holy presence of Christ in the world, whose task is to build communities of holy character. The church is not a building, steeple, resting place but a people. They are those called out of the world, off the many people into a kingdom where God reigns. The emphasis of many scholars has always remained that the church is not necessarily a denomination or a physical location. It is an integral body of Christ where God's children existing in the world as a spiritual representation of God through Christ. The kerygma (apostolic message about Christ) centralizes the proclamation of the Church and its entire life and identity.

Ekpendu (2016) believes that the Greek word *kuriakos* meaning that which "belongs to the Lord" also is a derivative for the term church. Ekpendu insists that ἐκκλησία (Ekklesia) meaning "to call out" most preferred by many scholars was used in the political circle but later given a discrete Christian connotation. This was because the LXX had used it as a translation for the Hebrew qahal (a meeting, an assembly or those called out). Hence sooner than later the Ekklesia became a common identity for the Christians. The disciples continued to go by the name and affixed the holy name to the title, thus the 'Ekklesia/assembly

of God'. The church is now made up of those people called out for God or set aside for God. Their calling was made possible through Jesus Christ. Iliya (2021) comments that "The church is a living organism and its mission is to reach people with the message of the transformation of individuals and society" (p. 2). The mission and purpose of the church gained momentum from Luke's volume II in Acts of the Apostles 1:8. Starting from this apostolic era, the church has not withdrawn from spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

History of the Christian Missionaries in Anambra State

The coming of Christianity into Igboland and to other parts of West Africa is remarkable. The enormous historical document that was developed around the subject is a testament to the versatility of the historic encounter. Activities of the Royal Niger Company were instrumental in the formation of the colonial Nigeria. The above history further forms a significant part of the Igbo history. It was not a very easy task for earliest missionary projects in Igboland. The first attempt of the missionaries did not yield much because of the challenging situation of the African region. Ekechi (1971) remarks that the Christian missionary attempts to convert the Igbos to Christianity began in 1857. The number of Christian converts however was not impressive as those whom the missionaries came across prior to 1900 were mainly people who, perhaps were alienated from traditional society, or suffered from certain natural misfortunes.

The period following the first attempt marked the beginning of their missionary success. This acceptance or rather adjustment by the 19th century was necessary to the Igbo populace as many realized that coping with colonialism will demand association with the new religion. The Bible and the plough as tagged by Okpalike and Nwadiakor (2015) remains a vivid way of describing the manner of the colonial-Christian hegemony in Nigeria. Egwuonwu and Alaokwu (2024) more so identified some of the key persons in Church Mission Society Igbo/Onitsha mission centers, they include persons like J.F. Schon, S.A. Crowther, Simon Jonas, Rev Henry Venn and J.C. Taylor. Others from the Roman Catholic Mission included Father Lutz, Father Joseph Shanahan and Father Joseph Henry. By the end of the 19th century, the mission in Onitsha and its environs has fully commenced. The C.M.S. station first settled in Aboh later expanded. Nwabara (1971) adds that Simon Jonas and Rev J.C. Taylor were left behind in the Ibo/Igbo country, at a place on the left bank named Onitsha. This was where they wished to find a trading station and this was intended to be of permanent nature. The situation of this mission at Onitsha was strategic because it was the beginning of missionary penetration of the now Anambra state and many parts of the Igboland.

Examining the Church-State Relations in Anambra

The relation between the church and the state is an important one. Religion especially in Africa wields a lot of influence on the people. The scholars like Umeanolue (2020), opines that religion has been a dominant factor in Nigerian politics especially in this post independence era. Others including Kukah (1993), Ogugua and Ogugua (2015), Eleagu (2018) share similar view on the role of religion and its impact and inadvertent influence on politics. The intertwining of religion and politics in the present times is more evident in developing societies like Africa. Ekwunife (1992) therefore notes the shift in this emphasis in developed countries. Just like many critics, Ogugua and Ogugua (2015) admit that politicization of

religion is one of the blind eyes of the Nigerian nation. The submission of several scholars about the reality of the dependence of politics on religion and vice versa is truly a Nigerian experience.

Further, Ejimbeonwu (2024) citing the second Vatican Council document comments that “the Council fathers noted that the political community (state) and the church are mutually independent and self-governing. Yet both communities are also in large extent have the same subjects which belong to both spheres” (p. 68). In Anambra state since the advent of the church in the state, the state and the church have continuously related in different capacities for the common good. Christians and Christianity as a religion and a social institution are considerably a significant part of the state. The number of churches and the multitudinous groups in the state attest to this tremendous presence of the religion. Nwokocha (2021) observes that:

following the dominance of Christianity in the state, with its attendant rivalry and unhealthy competitions amongst the various groups and denominations; it appears the Christian religion has straddled across and has taken the architectural design and construction of Anambra state polity in matter of religious and political competition (p. 142).

However more than any other religious groups or Christian order, the Orthodox churches (the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church) which are most popular players in the church-state relation in Anambra. The state, Anambra, is a well known Christian state in Nigeria. This is apt because a greater percentage of the people are Christians. Having attested to the landmark input of the church in the state, the past two administrations in Anambra state collaborated greatly with church on many levels. It is worthy to note here that it was the Peter Obi’s administration that made the first huge step by returning some of the former mission schools to the church. A mission-state management plan was initiated by him. Consequent upon this, this administration thought it better to fly these former mission schools as model schools in the state hence the return to the church. Revitalization of these schools commenced earnestly with the unreserved support from the government and subsequent administration continued with the method. Governor Willie Obiano provided financial support worth 714 million naira to Catholic and the Anglican missions to aide in the developing of the schools in the state. This was to help in the repositioning of the schools by combating infrastructure decay (Premium Times, August 8th, 2019). Further Madu (2024), reports of similar monetary support from Prof. Soludo as the current state governor. The government made various donations to missionary schools in the state to sustain quality education.

The directions of these governments and their policies however did not sit well with some persons and groups. Critics have often questioned these alliances and some rather describes the negative impact of such relationship as they see it as one sided. Within the Christian denominations not all were satisfied with such unbalanced approach. This was especially the Pentecostal members. Bishop Paul Nwachukwu under the umbrella of Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Anambra state chapter addressed the issue of religious and denominational politics which to him have plagued Anambra for a long time. He enjoined the incoming governor as such; if you want to succeed as governor, don’t try to impress any Bishop or General Overseer; your policies and appointments should be based on competence and merit (People’s Gazette, March 13th, 2022). This advice of the Bishop tails the already festering grudges and feeling of exclusion on the basis of denominational affiliations the administration before Prof. Charles Soludo. The

major angst of many against the some of the Orthodox was that they were held highly than others and perceived to be treated better. Such alliance and co-operation here was seen as an outright domination of a few denominations over others especially as it concerns receiving of donations and attention of the government. This is to say that the covert and the overt influence of some church leaders in determination of several political appointments did not sit well with others. It came off strongly as the exploitation of government for denominational cum religious gains. In the past few years, the Anambra state government has built and invested much in improving the facilities and institutions owned by the church. This includes; schools, hospitals, care homes, technological and skill acquisition centers.

At the same time, some scholars have taken up the task of exploring those areas the church have contributed meaningfully to the state progress. According to Duke and Okafor (2020), “the church has reduced poverty index of people in Anambra state through partnering with the non-governmental organizations and the government in its justice, development and similar bodies” (pp. 50-51). Okpala (2024) and Afunugo (2024) also affirm the involvement of the church in supporting flood victims in the state especially from the Riverine areas. Okpala reports of the exemplary display of kind gestures of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter -Day Saints that partnered with the state government to assist the flood victims. Afunugo likewise recount the various ways the Anglican Church in Anambra have supported the internal flood displaced persons.

It is clear so far that the church-state relation in the state has been a mutually productive one. The church established institutions and social agencies have received enormous boost and support from the government. Therefore, institutions be it ecclesiastical or that of government must be active and effective in order to achieve exponential growth and development. Apparently, the symbiotic relationship between the church and the state in Anambra state should not be discontinued or interrupted given the current socioeconomic dilemma prevalent in the country.

Employment and Economic Status in Anambra State

Nations whether developed or developing ones are always concerned with finding ways to totally eliminate unemployment. Solving this crisis of unemployment gives that particular country chances to fight poverty and its many concomitant effects. Such unemployment and under employment is not Anambra state problem only, it is general in Nigeria. It is obtainable even in high internal revenue generating states and also a concern in the states receiving substantial federal government allocation. People have continued to migrate to different urban and semi-urban areas in search for greener pastures. Uchechukwu, Amechi, Okeke and Okoye (2023) aver that unemployment in Anambra state has led to increase in social vices like kidnapping, prostitution, robbery and thuggery. Notwithstanding different training projects this present administration did engaged in, they have not translated into productive job opportunities. This is possibly because of lack of adequate monitoring and supervision of these projects. The outfall therefore defeats the purpose of the training itself as very few end up practicing the skill in reality. Nwobi, Emenike and Chukwurah (2021) examine the impact of ANIDS as the developmental plan of the Peter Obi’s administration. These scholars recognized the reach of ANIDS but however decried the shortcomings of the projects. They list: dearth of visionary leaders, population expulsion, poor governance, environmental factors, and unequal weight of the demand with the supply. If one may add,

insecurity is one of the current banes of development in the state. Likewise the periodic flooding of the agrarian communities across the river Niger region contributes also the depleting economic conditions of the people and hardship in Anambra.

Efforts of the Church and the State towards Actualizing Sustainable development Goal Number Eight (8)

Government administrations in Nigeria and correspondingly in Anambra work and organize their policies to align with what is obtainable in the global world. Hence, they plan development goals to align with the global view. The member countries of the United Nations strive to accomplish this common goal outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The aim is for a better world and development of the global world at the same time. This has been the case in Anambra as different administration try to make better the living and the entire social conditions of the people better. In the past two decades, starting from Mr. Peter Obi's administration, ANIDS (Anambra Integrated Development Strategy) was initiated as the plan for the development of the state. The plan was one of a kind as it was forged to match the objectives of the global Millennium Development Goals obtainable at the time under United Nations. It was targeted to effect development in all sectors simultaneously in Anambra state. Prior to this development strategy of 2008, the state was not as progressive as to that which was achieved in a short while. Peace, security and stability were the evident result of the programme. Ogu, Nwafor and Chukwurah (2020) explain that:

The strategy tried to ensure that the meticulous planning, participatory/demand-driven budgeting as well as accountability and transparency in the management of very scarce resources of the Anambra state would record achievements that would improve the quality of life of the masses in every single sphere of life (p. 51).

It was the birth of these developmental goals and plan of the state mapped under ANIDS that the church-state relations became more meaningful. The need to rather ensure that all existing facilities and structures in the state whether state or mission owned are functioning optimally is encouraged. After this, the Obiano's administration emulated similar plan that aligns with Sustainable Development Goals. It also focused on agriculture as a way of moving the state from consumer economy. Omenugha, Uzuegbunam and Eze (2018) note that "Obiano's administration, while retaining traces of ANIDS, moved somewhat towards a paradigm shift in the developmental plan of the state" (p. 200). The blueprint adopted by him was, "Anambra Wheel of Development". The administration however took up the following as the four (4) pillars of this design, they are: agriculture, trade and commerce, industrialization, oil and gas. This present administration of Prof. C.C. Soludo seems to also lean towards realizing the United Nations SDGs. Remarkably, concrete efforts are made by the present government to revitalize the state as a digital hub and a place conducive for investment. It emphasizes further the value of investing in education as a way of achieving these goals. Free education in public primary and secondary schools is a laudable means of showcasing its interest in human and capital development. In addition to these, several skill acquisitions programmes have been launched to train thousands of youths for skill empowerment.

The Christian churches especially those with significant social institutions are playing their part to see that these aspirations and goals of the state government are achieved. They are actively involved in the total

development and enhancement of human lives championed by the state. Various subventions often provided by state government have further raised their efficiency and capacity to provide quality educational and training programmes. Some of these skill acquisitions have birthed and nurtured entrepreneurial outfits that are fast booming in the state. The students from the vocational and digital institutes managed by the church in Anambra have shown resilience and have contributed towards provision of employment for others.

Roles Played by the Church in the Development of the State

Education: The church since the inception of the missionary activities in Anambra, has remained dedicated towards quality education. It is this education that remains the focal of every sustainable development. Without this, it may be impossible to conceive a system that has lasting value and effect in the society. Therefore, to this end, quality education gives concrete bearing for a possibility of decent work and economic development. Various scholarships and relatively affordable school fees are worth mentioning as the ways the church has continued to show concern for community development. The vast of the mission schools, theological institutes, colleges of health and education is a proof of the influence of the church in Anambra. Iwuoha (2018) highlights the role of the church in providing sustainable education in Nigeria. The admirable performance of many of the students in these government-mission schools in the state is incredible. Obviously, the church has shown its astute expertise in the field of education.

Poverty Alleviation and Business Support: The church has always taken the welfare of its members and society seriously. Poverty alleviation projects or exercises are highly attested as evidence of its relevance in the world and core aspect of church life. Across different churches is this shared aspiration to affect lives positively. In many occasions, the less privileged in these communities appears to be the primary concern. Ike and Omeke (2024) assert that the Catholic church's teachings emphasize solidarity, justice and charity as essential for addressing poverty. The church encourages everyone to support the poor, recognizing it as a matter of justice and restoring what is rightfully theirs. Aside cases of charity giving, many of these churches have at one time or the other provided micro loans and soft loans to the members of the communities. This usually goes with easy payback plans and low interest rates. Currently, at the diocesan level of many orthodox is the establishment of microfinance banks. These microfinance banks particularly church owned are now facilitating easy securing of these loans. Other times, these loans are disbursed through informal means, this is often granted mostly to trusted church members. Poverty alleviation also could come in the form of economic empowerment. Seed capital for startup of small scale businesses through this avenue is given to some people for local trading.

Agriculture: The church in Anambra has played tangible roles in motivating and inspiring community members to embrace agriculture as an employment opportunity. In today's time where agriculture is considered as less prestigious, the church encourages members to not abandon subservient farming and other forms if investments in agriculture sector. Today, churches especially those in the local communities, sponsor and source for seed plants for the members as a way of assisting them. Individuals often donate seeds and roots for planting that are promptly shared during the planting season. As a way of support and

bridging the biting effect of hardship, some churches also buy the seeds and roots and give them out for free or sell them at a reduced price to the masses.

Skill Acquisition and Vocational Training: Missionary skill and vocational institutes many at times remain functional and productive for a longer time than some government owned institutes. This is because they are usually guided and guarded by stricter policy and management unlike the latter. Change in governments, embezzlement of funds and misappropriation of funds, resources and general bad management forces many of the government skill acquisition centers to shut down after a time. Some of these mission vocational institutes include: His Promise, Vocational Awka, Catch Them Young Talent and Skill Acquisition Center, Nkpor, All Saints school of Vocational Nnewi, Divino Amore Vocational Institute, St John's Innovation Institute of Management and Technology, Neni and Mary Summer Vocational Training School, Awka among others.

Employment and Referral Privileges: The church establishment including schools, hospitals, microfinance banks, bookshops, computer training centers, business entities and transport services form a significant quota in institutions that are active in job creation and empowerment for the masses. Ranging from the skilled to the unskilled, these entities and business establishments are recruiting workers. The church also serves as a link for job recruiting. They frequently take part in announcing job opportunities; vet certain candidates on the demand of the corporation often based on their known character and conduct in the community. It is worthy to note here that the church in Anambra is concerned with restoring moral virtues by tackling joblessness. Creating these jobs is a means of economic development.

Factors that Undermine the Attempts of the Church and the State Government to Motivate Decent Work and Economic Growth

Problem of Funding: The church as a component of the community ordinarily is keen towards positive impact to the society. In many places, these churches that understand the importance of Jesus' public life and redemption call is to engage in activities that affect the economic life of the church and also directly that of the society itself. However, the core challenge is not having the idea or the needed creative skills to execute the projects but in raising funds for these projects. This situation therefore makes it difficult for the church to carry on with such developmental projects. Again, the high cost of running these programmes and establishments deter the church from continuing or cause them to reduce the funding and staffing in their institutions.

Persistent Poverty and Inflation: The increasing poverty rate in the country likewise discouraged the church from establishing standard facilities for learning of these life skills and vocations. More so, many find it difficult to pay for the already subsidized levies and fees for these training programmes. Again, the high cost of living and inflation are some of the reasons many graduates of the numerous training schools still find it establish the skill even after training.

Insecurity: Businesses, institutions, the economy itself and the people in the society need peace and security to thrive. The canker-worm that was once handled haphazardly has festered to encroach on the lives of the people. The number of lives, businesses and organizations destroyed by insecurity in Anambra is staggering. Anazodo, Chioke and Obijaju (2024) maintain that unemployment and under-employment

gave rise to insecurity in the state. For them, insecurity could be surmounted through quality education and collaboration. It is believed that those involved in criminal activities are largely from the class of those denied quality education. Okoli, Oladipo and Onugha (2023) bemoan the rate of insecurity in Anambra and opine that it has affected the economy of the state as the cost of doing business in this region have increased and automatically affect the investors output, turnover, rate of employment generation and finances. The businesses and establishments of the church are not left as they have to spend extra on improving security measures.

Poor Return of Loans and Business/Investments: Recuperating these loans is not easy. This is because some persons due to personal interest, greed and the overall challenging situation of the country find it difficult to return these soft loans and even those gotten from mission microfinance banks. They normally see it as something meant solely for charity and should not be repaid promptly. The trails of bad debts had affected these businesses and loaning facilities. As a result, it becomes hard for many to maintain the business after some years.

Disregard for the Value of Hard Work and Honest Means of Living: Depletion in the moral system is a general problem however the current drive of some scrupulous elements in Anambra shows that it is considerably high in the state. The number of these young boys that have taken to crimes, kidnapping and ritual killings is a sign of a radical change in values. In many communities of Anambra, the number of the school dropouts that roaming the street idly and without any legitimate source of income is on the rise. For this set, there is no need to enroll any of these listed avenues of legitimate economic empowerment available in the state. This in itself is an obstacle to promotion of decent work and economic growth in the state.

Insufficient Collaboration/Partnership: Actualizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires collaboration. Emphatically, collaboration and partnership are the last goal in the SDGs. This is even more effective when it goes beyond church-state partnership. Collaboration between different Christian denominations in the state is anticipated and most welcomed as it will foster unity and present stronger Christian voice. This could come in the form of sharing and exchanging of ideas on the subject of economic development in the state. Eliminating to the least the sense of competition and ignite cooperation for better outcomes. Global partnership is the final aim of this goal at this point. This is to say that external partnership and sponsorship is desired as it will boost the limited funds for the running of these initiatives.

Conclusion

This research ends the study with a summary and conclusion. This work “The role of the church in Anambra state in promoting decent work and economic growth: Prospects and Challenges” has tried to examine the nature of the relationship between the church and the state in Anambra state. The earlier colonial in the state opened doors for the establishment of schools and trading as an occupation for the people. This work also studied the various methods that past administrations had interacted with the church. It further searched for the ways the church has positively affected employment and economic development of the state. Some of the contributions of the church include; massive effort in the education and training sector, employing people at its various establishments, support in the agricultural sector,

offering loans and sponsoring of small-scale businesses among others. In the midst of these efforts are the mirage of problems that hinders these contributions of the Church. Chiefly is insecurity and instability, poverty and high cost of living, poor returns of loans and the popular aversion of hard work by the youths. The listed challenges and other factors have mitigated the achievements church in Anambra. This is why the value for decent work is continuously dwindling. These incidences rather promote unrest, fear and decline economic capacity of the state.

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