

# **THE LOCAL CHURCH AS PRIMARY DEVELOPMENT AGENT.**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION.**

The local church in most cases has not been involved in the development process in most African countries. What usually happens is that development departments are set up at the church denominational levels and are given the responsibility to carry out development programmes at the community level. In some other cases, para-church organisations carry out development programmes at the community level. These organisations employ staff who are posted to serve in various communities. Although in many cases, the development workers go through the local churches in order to reach the communities, the local churches do not see such development programmes as part of their ministry. Rather, they see themselves as part of the beneficiaries of the programmes. The local church is only asked to give support to the efforts of the development department or the para-church organisation but it is not seen as part and parcel of the development process. In many cases, the local church is by-passed and the Christian development organisations deal directly with the local communities.

Although many pastors have received training on the role of the church in development, most of them are yet to translate that into involving the local church in the development process. Most local churches see their ministry as limited to evangelism, teaching and discipleship. Social work is often limited to financial and material assistance to the needy. Little or no efforts are made to mobilise communities to take action to solve common problems that affect the community. It is often felt that it is the responsibility of the church development department to carry out development programmes.

This lack of involvement of the local church in the development process has made the church not to be truly the light and salt of the community in which it is situated. It has also made the church not to have a positive influence on the community. It also makes the church's evangelistic efforts less effective as the church tends to look over look many needs in the community. The lack of involvement also makes the church to be more inward looking instead of being outward looking; reaching out to the people around and beyond.

The local church should see development programmes as part and parcel of their ministry. As the local church is part of the community, it should embark on community mobilisation programmes aimed at enabling people identify, analyse, plan and take action to solve their problems so that people can live fulfilled lives as intended by God. If local churches are involved in this way, then the role of church development departments would then need to change from direct involvement with communities to building the capacity of local churches to carry out wholistic development programmes.

For this change of approach to succeed, there has to be awareness creation among the church leaders/pastors and re-orientation of church development departments/para-church organisations involved in development work. Denominational church leaders, leaders of church development departments, local church pastors, Christian development organisations and Christian donor agencies would need to understand and agree with the concept of focusing on the local church as the primary development agent.

## **2. RATIONALE FOR LOCAL CHURCH AS PRIMARY DEVELOPMENT AGENT.**

Jesus Christ came and established the church that is the visible body of Christ represented by those people who have accepted him as their Lord and saviour. John Stott describes the church as “ the chosen and beloved people of God, his own special treasure, the covenant community to whom he has committed himself for ever, engaged in continuous worship, a haven of love and peace, and a pilgrim people headed for the eternal city.” This describes the ideal church. There is the universal church that refers to the body of all Christians world - wide. There is also the local church which refers to the body of Christians in a specific local setting. Our focus is on the local church which is in direct contact with the local community. Because of the direct contact with the local community, the local church is strategically placed and has a great opportunity to minister to the needs of the members of the community be they spiritual or physical.

God called and equipped the church not to minister to it's members only, but to reach out and minister in a wholistic way to needy people who are outside the church. The mission of the church is to declare and demonstrate the gospel( Matt.28:18,19; Matt.22:37-39) to a sinful and a suffering world unto the building of the Kingdom of God. There is always the tendency for the local church to be inward looking and not outward looking thereby concentrating it's programs on it's members forgetting about the needy people outside there. Jesus said we (the church) are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.(Matt.5:13,14). This means the local church must have a positive influence on the community in which it is situated. The local church must therefore be prepared to go out where the people are, listen to them, find out what their needs are and together with them design programs to meet their needs.

For the local church to effectively minister to members of the surrounding community, it must first of all be a model of the Kingdom of God in every aspect of life. This must be characterised by love for one another which should result in social justice, righteousness and economic prosperity. For the local church to be a model, efforts must be made to build their capacity to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate wholistic community based development programs. This should be the main role of church development departments and other Christian development organisations.

If every local church effectively carries out wholistic community out reach, the impact of this both at the local and national levels would be great. It would mean a wider range of communities would be reached and transformed to the glory of God. In this way, the church would positively influence the society at the national and international levels.

Involving the local church in the development process will be more cost effective as there would be more use of volunteers rather than full time workers. The local churches would be less dependent on donors as many local churches are able to generate funds which could be used to support the work of the volunteers. This would make the local church programmes more sustainable. Where some local churches are not able to raise sufficient funds, the church denomination could make arrangements in such a way that financial assistance can be given to them with funds from the richer churches.

## **3. STAKEHOLDERS .**

The stakeholders in the whole process of enabling the local church to serve as the primary development agent at the community level would be the following:

**Denominational Church Leaders.**

They would need to fully understand and agree with the concept of the local church as the primary development agent at the community level and give their full support for this to be successful.

**Leaders of Church Development Departments and Para-Church Organisations.**

They would also need to fully understand and agree with the concept of the local church as the primary development agent at the community level and give their full support for this approach.

**The Local Church.**

The local church would need to be sensitised to see itself as the primary development agent in the community where it is situated. The local church would need to understand and agree play this role.

**Local Church Pastors/Leaders.**

They would need to understand the role of the church in development and give their whole support for the involvement of the local church at the community level.

**Church Development Departments/Christian Development Organisations.**

Their primary role would be to support and build the capacity of local churches to carry out wholistic and community based development programmes. Their capacity building efforts would include training, counselling, technical support, and networking. There would be a need for re-orientation of these organisations to play these roles.

**The Local Community.**

The local community would need to be mobilised by the local church. For this to happen, there must be a cordial relationship between the local church and the community.

**Community Leaders.**

They would need to understand the importance and need for community development efforts to improve the quality of life of their people and give their full support for community development initiatives.

**Local Church Development Committee.**

This Committee would have the responsibility of planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the development programmes of the local church.

**Local Church Development Facilitators/Animators (Volunteers).**

These are volunteers from the local church who would assist in mobilising the community for community development programmes.

**Community Development Committee.**

Members of this committee would be elected by the local community and would be responsible for the implementation of community development programmes as agreed by the entire community.

**Theological Institutions.**

They would have a key role to play in the training of pastors and church workers on wholistic development, biblical basis of development and the role of the local church in development.

**Training Providers/Consultants.**

These are organisations or individuals that would provide training for the church development departments and Christian development organisations that assist local churches in the development process. The training provided would be wide ranging including strategic planning, leadership, management, wholistic and community based development approaches, PRA, monitoring and evaluation. They would also provide follow up support and counselling.

**Christian Development Associations and Evangelical Fellowships.**

These would play the role supporting and training church denominational development departments and Christian development organisations in wholistic and community based development programmes.

**Donor Agencies.**

They would need to understand this approach and provide financial and technical support to some of the stakeholders for this approach to succeed.

**4. STRATEGY.**

In order to enable the local church to be the primary development agent in the community where it is located, the following strategy would need to be adopted.

**Development of Concept Paper.**

A concept paper on the rationale for the local church as primary development agent in community based development would need to be developed. The paper should also dwell on how the local church can serve as the primary development agent. This write-up should be properly researched with biblical examples and case studies of where this concept has been applied. Development of the paper may mean visiting some Christian development organisations and having some discussions with them. The paper should be concise, easy to read and understand. This should be sent to denominational church leaders, para-church organisations and Christian development organisations for their input and comments.

**Awareness Consultations.**

Awareness consultations with denominational church leaders, leaders of para-church organisations, leaders of church development departments and Christian development organisations (CDOs) should be organised at the national level. The main objective of the consultations would be to discuss the concept paper and come to an agreement on the need for the local church to be directly involved wholistic community development programmes.

**Re-orientation Workshops.**

The existing church development departments and para-church organisations involved in development work would need to understand and agree with the concept of the local church as the primary development agent and change their strategies accordingly. This would require a lot of changes in the mode of operation of these organisations. The re-orientation workshops would be aimed at enabling the staff of these organisations to understand the need for the change and the

requirements for the implementation of the new approach. The workshops would also enable them to go through the change process effectively.

### **Strategic Planning Workshops.**

Once the staff of church development departments and para-church organisations understand the need for the change, then they are ready for a strategic planning process. Therefore this should immediately follow the re-orientation workshops. Strategic plans could be developed for a period of 5 to 10 years.

### **Awareness Workshops.**

Awareness workshops would need to be organised for leaders of local churches (Pastors and Elders or Deacons). Topics to be covered in these workshops would be wholistic development (including biblical basis for the churches involvement in development), the role of the local church in development, and community based development approaches. This would enable the local churches to understand their roles and responsibilities in the development process.

### **Strategic Planning for Local Churches.**

Strategic planning should be facilitated for local churches that are ready to play their role as primary development agent. This could cover a period of 3 to 5 years.

### **Training on Community Based Development Approaches/PRA.**

The training would be at 2 levels. One for the CDOs and development departments and the second for local churches. The training would mainly be on community based development approaches and focusing on Participatory Rural Appraisal. The first training would be a kind of training of trainers workshops so as to enable them to train local churches. The second training will be more practical as it would be aimed at preparing the local churches for initiating community development programmes in their communities.

### **Networking.**

The emphasis here is on learning from other people's experiences and sharing information and ideas on local church involvement in the development process.

## **5. THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH.**

There are 2 main roles that the church should play in the development process at the community level. These are values transformation and community organising.

### **Values Transformation.**

One of the first programmes that churches should embark upon is moral recovery through intentional values transformation based on the Bible the infallible word of God. It is clear to any discerning person that some moral values previously up held high are being lost or watered down. People should value the good and best aspects of their traditions and culture and work at enhancing them. Valuing the best that there is will motivate them to positively envision the future and work towards actualising it.

Value systems must be transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit. This should be done through consistent and in-depth Bible study and preaching on various themes related to values.

The values that must be in place to enhance poverty alleviation and community transformation would include the following:

- Love for one another.
- Honesty and sincerity.
- Community spirit.
- Accountability.
- Decision making by consensus.
- Hard work.
- Discipline.
- People's creativity.
- Indigenous/appropriate technologies.
- Justice.

### **Community Organising.**

Community organising is the process of getting people to identify and solve their community problems through collective actions that will neutralise or eliminate the immediate or radical causes of the problem and constraints to a wholistic quality of life of the community. They go deeper to find out the root causes of their poverty and find possible solutions to them. All members of the community are involved in the whole process. Community organising values the worth, dignity and capability of people as human beings created in the image of God. Through this process, people are actually awakened, empowered and organised to identify their own problems as they assess their situations and take initiative and responsibility in finding solutions and in using their own resources. Given the opportunity to develop and organise themselves, the powerless poor are enabled to collectively advance their common interests and aspirations before the powerful - those who have the wealth and control of resources both internal and external of the community. Thus, the community begins to have a hand in decisions for their community life and freedom to direct their destiny for a better quality of life.

Since the main goal of development is the empowerment of people, it is paramount that the people are enabled to organise themselves to form community or people's organisations through which they can exercise control over their affairs and undertake activities that will lead to the benefit of all concerned. Community organisations could take the form of self-reliant cooperatives, savings and credit associations, women and youth groups, farmers associations and trade associations. The important thing is that they must be mutual benefit organisations that derive their legitimacy on their abilities to serve their members interests. In addition, they must have democratic structures that give members ultimate authority over their leaders. The members must be able to hold their leaders accountable. They must also be self-reliant in the sense that their continued existence does not depend on outside initiative or funding. When properly managed, these community organisations should be able to carry out both economic and political functions very well thereby empowering the people. They can organise training for their members based on their needs. These community organisations can and should form alliances at various levels depending on each country's structure of government.

The local church should play a facilitative role in the whole process of community organising with assistance from Christian development organisations.

## **6. THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS.**

For local churches to play their roles as primary development agents, they must be adequately supported or assisted by Christian development organisations. The main role of Christian development organisations in this approach would be to assist in building the capacity of local churches and community organisations to facilitate and undertake wholistic and community based development programmes. In order for the Christian development organisations to be able to play this role effectively, they would have to be trained in various aspects of capacity building. The capacity building role to be played by Christian development organisations would include the following:

### **Training.**

Training should be provided for the local churches on wholistic ministry and the role of the church in development. In addition, training should be provided in areas such as: Community based development/Participatory Rural Appraisal; leadership and management; resource mobilisation; financial control and accountability; appropriate technologies; monitoring and evaluation. Training should be participatory, learner-centred, experiential and contextualised. Community organisations too need to be adequately trained in various aspects of development work as mentioned above so that they can carry out their responsibilities effectively.

### **Follow-up/Counselling.**

Christian development organisations should make themselves available to the local churches for giving advice and encouragement especially at the initial stages of the programme. At the initial stages, local churches would need a lot of coaching on how to play their facilitative roles in the community organising process especially considering that mistakes could be made and discouragement could set in. There is also the need to build their confidence in applying the various methodologies. This would entail constant visits by staff of the Christian development organisations.

### **Networking.**

Different community groups and organisations should interact together for the purpose of sharing and exchange of information, ideas and experiences. Access to basic and relevant information is very crucial towards enabling communities to develop themselves. Very often, development is hindered by lack of adequate information. The information required could be in the areas of agriculture, health, housing, appropriate technology, water and sanitation, etc. Networking helps to provide this basic information. Christian development organisations should therefore promote networking among community groups and organisations by organising exchange visits, creating forums for regular meetings.

## **7. CONCLUSION.**

In Africa, the local church has not been seen as the primary development agent. This is a new concept that may take some time for people to understand and agree with. The implementation of this concept would take a long time. A lot of patience is therefore needed for those who are interested in seeing that this concept is applied at the local church level.

For the successful implementation of this concept, it would be very important to begin with those church denominations and local churches understand and agree with the concept. Once they

begin the implementation of the programme, they would serve as a model for other churches to follow.