

Faith communities, youth and development in Mozambique

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In Mozambique, poverty is pervasive because of factors such as the civil war (1976–1992) and its aftermath, political instability, food scarcity and natural disasters. This article elucidates the situation of post-civil war Mozambique from a socio-political perspective with a specific focus on children and the youth as a particularly vulnerable group. Many children and young people have been displaced and are subject to work exploitation and sexual abuse. Female children also fall victim to the cultural practice of child marriage. The absence of comprehensive social measures for the protection of vulnerable young persons has a detrimental effect on their welfare and future prospects. The aim of the article is to explore the role that faith communities and church institutions can play in this context. From an inclusive congregational perspective, the inclusion of youth in all aspects of faith communities as a strategy for development is discussed. From a human rights and theological perspective, participatory action is required for faith communities and church institutions to contribute to making a life of human dignity possible for children and young people.

Keywords: children and youth; Mozambique; youth development; faith communities; church institutions.

Introduction

Since the end of the civil war in 1992 and the democratic elections in 1994, Mozambique has gone through a prolonged period of political tension and economic challenges. The entire population has been affected to some extent. However, the prospects of those groups that are most vulnerable in society are particularly bleak. This includes children and young people. Government policies have prioritised access to education and the establishment of a health infrastructure. However, poverty remains widespread. A large percentage of the labour force remains dependent upon subsistence farming. There is a persistent gender disparity with regard to poverty, education and literacy. Poverty, the disintegration of families and HIV and/or AIDS are factors that contribute to large numbers of children living on the streets (see UNICEF 2006:95).

The lack of food security in the country and widespread malnutrition among the most vulnerable remain prevalent. More than 10 million Mozambicans do not have sufficient food. Some have no income. Many who do have an income earn a wage well below the poverty line. These problems are generally more severe in rural areas than in urban areas. It is estimated that 46% of children who live in rural areas and 29% of children who live in urban Mozambique are affected by poverty (World Bank 2008). Although there has been some economic growth in the country since the end of the war, the benefits of this have not reached the broad base of the population and have not in any significant way benefited the poor (see James, Arndt & Simler 2005).

The article elucidates the situation in post-civil war Mozambique from a socio-political perspective. The aim is to then explore the role that faith communities and church institutions can play in this context in order to address and alleviate the problems of the youth and improve their lives. *Education* is a significant factor when it comes to the alleviation of poverty and human development. Therefore, education is a focus area for bringing about the much-needed social change. From a *human rights perspective*, change is needed not only with regard to access to education but also with respect to the rights of all children and young people in local communities, both urban and rural. From a *Christian theological perspective*, the gospel message of respect for human beings who were created in the image of God impels the followers of Christ to get involved when human beings are caught up in lives that do not afford them basic human dignity. The role of faith communities and church institutions as active partners in youth development is investigated in

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this article in order to trace how the church fulfils or can fulfil its mission in society today and in the future. The point of departure of the article is a practical theology that focuses on a specific, local and embedded context (Mueller 2005:78–79). The aim of the article is to identify the ways in which faith communities and church institutions can contribute to improving the situation of vulnerable children and youth in Mozambique. Areas for further constructive involvement are suggested.

The situation

Mozambique has come a long way since the signing of the General Peace Agreement (GPA) which aimed to establish 'lasting peace'. Most observers were less than optimistic about the prospects for peace and development in Mozambique. In everyday life, political instability and violence continued. In November 2000, Carlos Cardoso, a journalist and an editor who owned an independent journal, was assassinated as he was investigating claims of fraud connected with the privatisation of a state-owned bank. The suspicion is that it was Cardoso's knowledge of corruption that led to his death. The political environment in Mozambique is characterised by an ineffective opposition which lacks a solid ideological base. It remains a struggle to establish a strong democracy in the country. Opposition parties are dominated by individual and ethnic interests. This has resulted in the ruling party effectively monopolising all attempts to find solutions to the country's problems and designing paths to prosperity without any substantial contributions from other political perspectives. The absence of a solid ideological base among opposition parties has undermined the potential for a fruitful discussion on the development strategies (see UNDP 2009). The political and economic progress since 1992 is not only insignificant but also not entirely secure. The substantial task of reconstruction still lies ahead (see UNDP 2009:3, 10).

The recent history of Mozambique forms the backdrop of the current situation. The social and economic development of the youth has been negatively affected by the political instability. Furthermore, the country is among those that are worst affected by the recent financial and economic crisis (see Alderman et al. 2001). Also lacking is a comprehensive overview of the national labour market structure and the development of policies for generating productive employment (see Castel-Branco & Goldin 2003). In 2008, the country ranked 175th out of 179 in the UNDP Global Human Development Index (see UNDP Report 2009). Socio-economic and political problems faced by children and youth in Mozambique affect their access to basic services such as health and education. While such services are available, their quality is often questionable. Because of the widespread poverty, there is a significant level of dependency on foreign aid. Even after some macroeconomic recovery has been achieved in the country, the past crises still have a lasting impact on the poverty levels (Ravallion 2008:4).

The poorest of the poor did not benefit substantially by the measure of growth that was achieved. The financial and

economic crisis of 2008, on the other hand, affected all, with vulnerable groups most at risk of losing whatever little they had. It severely affected their standard of living (see Griffith-Jones & Ocampo 2009).

The World Bank Report of 2008 emphasised the inability of the formal sector in Mozambique to generate employment opportunities. The result is that people have to rely on the informal sector in order to try and make a living. The self-employed are estimated to account for 20% of the urban labour force (World Bank 2008:36).

Especially people with a low level of education are forced into the self-employment sector, because they lack the skills to obtain gainful employment elsewhere (World Bank 2008:38). Generally, the low level of education is a constraining factor when it comes to the empowerment of these entrepreneurs. The impact of the crisis at the level of the family and the individual became most visible in urban areas (see Griffith & Ocampo 2009:53). Increased prices for fuel and food, combined with the devaluation of the local currency, the Metical, in the past decade, have led to a decline in the standard of living of the majority of people. Since February 2008, protests have erupted regularly in the country's main cities in Maputo. Young people in particular are susceptible to negative influences on the streets.

The UNICEF Report of December 2006 emphasised that approximately half of the Mozambican children and youth still suffered from severe deprivation with regard to health care, education, nutrition and shelter, all of which are necessary for their survival. The report enabled faith communities to gain a more comprehensive picture of the situation in Mozambique and especially how this affects the children and youth. The large numbers of people living in extreme poverty made it virtually impossible that efforts to reduce poverty and procure other social advances could benefit everyone equally. Poverty in Mozambique was pointed out at the time to be a pervasive and deep-rooted problem, which resulted in a high percentage of children living in extreme poverty. This deprived them of basic human rights.

The United Nations Report of 2009 emphasised the impact of the economic and financial crisis of 2008 on the various provinces in Mozambique. The aftermath of the crisis is still today hindering the achievement of national development objectives and the country's Millennium Development Goals. It has also become clear that, because of the crisis, economic growth has not been satisfactory and that it affects the vulnerable, including the youth and children, most severely. According to the report, fewer economic opportunities were available and employment opportunities were less. This lowered public expenditure which, in turn, stunted economic growth. The crisis created an environment with an increasing need for social initiatives, but fewer resources available to meet the need.

Poverty in Mozambique, where more than half of the population continue to live on less than \$2.00 a day, has severe

consequences specifically for the youth and children. A high number of children and youth suffer from chronic malnutrition. It will take time to reverse the adverse effects of this. The number of children who have access to safe water is declining. Fewer children live in an environment with safe sanitation. The result is that children increasingly fall victim to the four leading causes of child mortality: malaria, neonatal death, acute respiratory infection and HIV and/or AIDS. According to Massingarela and Nhate (2006:22), the lack of mechanisms for social protection contributes to this downward spiral.

The Mozambican population is generally young, with a low level of literacy and poor working conditions. The majority of the population produce their own food or do business in the informal sector in order to try and make a living. Those who live in urban areas and do not have the capability of agricultural production have to rely on informal business activities. To address this concern, priority should be given to vulnerable groups.

According to Castel-Branco and Goldin (2003), an effective safety net in the form of a sound domestic policy, which can respond effectively to a crisis, is needed. Social protection should, according to Ravallion (2008), focus on the poorest people and their immediate situation, while also promoting the long-term recovery of the country as a whole. For Ravallion (2008:3; see Akesson & Nilson 2006:10), an equitable distribution of resources and programmes that target social groups at risk of being marginalised should take priority.

However, long-term economic growth will only partly address the issue of malnutrition and the effect this has on young people and children. More direct and immediate interventions are required (see Alderman et al. 2001:22). Social policies with regard to nutrition, basic education and health should be the main focus of policy making. The problem is that the ability to finance such programmes is questionable in the current environment.

Therefore, other interventions should be explored that can target vulnerable groups directly. This can include, for instance, the provision of school meals and special emergency employment programmes (see UNICEF 2006). This can also include the participation of faith communities and church institutions that have direct access to people of all walks of life. Their networks can provide invaluable resources on a grassroots level.

Consequences for the youth and children

The Government of Mozambique estimated that in 2011, nearly 200 000 children of school age were not in the school system. Despite government efforts to register all births, many children could not attend school because they could not provide a birth certificate, which is needed for enrolment. In spite of the clear code of conduct of the National Organization of Teachers, verbal abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse are common in schools.

Teachers often demand sex from students in order for them to advance to the next grade. For many children, this type of abuse leads to their withdrawal from school (see Bernardo 2013). According to the UNICEF Report of 2013, the main reason for the limited education possibilities in Mozambique is the lack of schools and teachers. Furthermore, although primary education is free, families still have to provide school supplies for the children. Many families cannot afford this.

Migrant children from neighbouring countries are used for child labour in border towns. According to the report, migrant children in the border town of Ressano Garcia work 10–12 h a day for a low wage or for no wage at all. These children do not have access to education. They work as street vendors and sell alcohol. In Mozambique, commercial sexual exploitation is common in rural areas and border towns, especially in the regions of Beira, Maputo, Nacala, Nampula and the Tete Province. Commercial sexual exploitation of girls occurs in bars, clubs, restaurants and at overnight stopping points in the southern transport corridor. There is no law prohibiting commercial sexual exploitation or child labour. Until laws are passed and penalties are imposed for transgression of these laws, children and young people will remain extremely vulnerable. Faith communities and the government, separately and in partnership, should develop strategies for child protection as well as initiatives to provide not only free but also compulsory education for all. Education is a crucial means of empowering children and young people and building capacity. Through education, they can also become aware of their rights and responsibilities. Educated young people can bring their knowledge to the communities.

The prevalence of child marriage in Mozambique is of the highest in the world. It affects almost half of all female children in the country (see Heinrich 2015). This has dire consequences for the health of female children and young women. Adolescent pregnancy carries a higher risk of maternal and child mortality. Child marriage in Mozambique is a complex issue. It requires changes not only at the policy level but also in the attitudes of communities. Improvement in education and better opportunities for female children and young women would provide them with the possibility to continue their studies and build a viable life for themselves, rather than being forced into marriage, mostly for economic reasons.

The UNICEF Report of 2015 emphasised that child marriage and adolescent pregnancy have a negative impact on a range of well-being indicators for women. It has a significant negative effect on the education of female children. Adolescent pregnancy is associated with higher risk of malnutrition and death among those who bear children at an early age. Why child marriage is so prevalent in Africa and so high specifically in Mozambique is related to a variety of factors. Regarding the issues of child marriage, adolescent pregnancy and the education of female children, social norms are often the basis of attitudes and practices. Poverty in the family places female children at risk of being forced into

marriage. One of the consequences is that the education of such female children comes to an end and brings to an end any economic opportunities they could have had. It perpetuates poverty. Mostly, female children are forced by their families to marry older men who can 'provide for them'. This is a symptom not only of poverty and dire social conditions but also of the pervasive gender inequality that still exists in culture and society. The inferior status accorded to girls and women lies at the heart of the practice of child marriage (Thomas 2009:48–62).

Social norms and cultural and religious practices influence women's social and economic roles, making girls vulnerable to child marriage. In Mozambique, women are excluded from decision-making regarding themselves, their families and the community. Men have full control over land and property. Men are the head of the family and make all the decisions regarding the lives of their family members. Because social value is generally ascribed to male children, while female children are regarded to be of lesser value, the social investment in the well-being of male children is much higher than that of female children. This includes investment in their health, education and development. These social inequalities systematically and systemically make girls vulnerable and put them at risk of child marriage and other social harms. If poverty is a major cause of child marriage, it then follows that Mozambique, which has a low gross domestic product, would also have a higher prevalence of child marriage. Economic difficulties can make child marriage an attractive option. If an adolescent girl is forced to marry an older man, this can improve the economic prospects of the families. A greater investment can then be made in the education of the male children (see Cherly 2009).

According to the UNICEF Report of 2015, the Mozambican government was in the process of designing and revising national policies and strategies with regard to adolescent women. Policies specific to the issue of child marriage include the National Coasted Strategy to Prevent and Eliminate Child Marriage in Mozambique (2015–2019). The aim is that this strategy would inform and be implemented in the various sectors across the board, of which the religion sector is one. The religion sector can perhaps have the most profound effect on changing attitudes and practices in communities and providing concrete assistance on a broad scale.

The contribution of faith communities and church institutions

South African youth ministry scholar, Malan Nel, identifies the isolation of young people from the larger church as one of the greatest problems facing ministry today. Children and adolescents should form an integral part of the congregation. Ministering to the youth should be the responsibility of the entire community of believers. He champions an inclusive approach to ministry, which he describes as follows (Nel 2003:15): 'The Inclusive Congregational Approach asserts

that youth ministry is not a separate or additional mode of God's coming to the youth'. American youth ministry scholar, Dean (2012:50), pleads for a 'theological turn' that will transform the way in which people engage youth ministry and also bring about widespread change in faith communities.

The contribution that faith communities and their ministries can make to and with young people in Mozambique is to empower and enable them to explore their capacity and potential ability. Faith communities should become an enabling environment which makes it possible for young people to overcome the plight of poverty and acquire knowledge and skills to ensure a sustainable livelihood. From the perspective of an inclusive approach to congregational ministry, the participation of young people, also in leadership and decision-making processes at all levels, can provide valuable mentorship. Through the efforts of the faith community and young people's full participation, they can develop their abilities and acquire skills in a safe environment. This can help to enable them to overcome *economic* and *social* barriers in their future lives. In cooperation with governmental initiatives and resources in their area, faith communities can, for instance, become involved in training for setting up small businesses, establishing and running shelters, teaching communication skills, informing young people of employment opportunities and providing them with information with regard to medical care services. In general, they can provide support and encouragement to foster the overall well-being of young people – physical, mental, psychological and spiritual.

Faith communities and churches can cooperate with the state to improve the situation of children and young people in Mozambique by focusing on quality basic education for all. Factors such as exclusion, violence, discrimination, the lack of participation of children and youth, low parental engagement and poor infrastructure present the greatest challenges in this regard. Child marriage has a profound and far-reaching impact on the basic human rights of young female persons. It is through engaging all stakeholders, from faith communities and their ministries, to the youth themselves, to parents, community leaders, Non-governmental Organization's and teachers' unions, that a concerted effort can be made towards a greater awareness of what the needs are, how to address these needs and how to affect change. Cooperation from the local, to the district, to the provincial and national level can provide a basis for future action. Faith communities and their ministries are particularly well situated for mobilisation, advocacy and campaigning on behalf of vulnerable young people.

Although there is already a measure of awareness among faith communities with regard to a child's right to education, the notion of 'children's rights' is often perceived as going against the grain of socio-cultural values and norms. Children are expected to be obedient to adults. There is very little opportunity for them to have or voice an opinion or to make choices for themselves. Faith communities that work on grassroots level with communities and their cultural values

can bring these values into discussion with the values of the gospel message (see Mueller 2005). Faith communities can facilitate discussions on how in practice certain values, norms and practices affect people and their futures in the long run. When cultural values are seen in the light of the gospel and the cause and effect relation becomes clear to people, attitudes and perceptions can change. That, in turn, can lead to an improved practice.

Faith communities are also well suited to bringing a variety of stakeholders into discussion with one another.

This can include teachers, community leaders, local education groups and teachers' unions. In this way, consciousness can be raised with regard to people's value as human beings in light of the gospel message as well as their basic human rights as persons in order that all parties together can mobilise to address the immediate needs of children and young people and to advocate for children's rights and for changes in policy and practice. Such solidarity initiated by faith communities can lead to strong networks, coalitions and alliances that can empower and strengthen the voice of the poor and marginalised. In this way, faith communities can work together with other individuals and structures to empower young persons, including those with disabilities, to engage meaningfully in advocacy work at all levels (see Mutyaba 2011:339–355).

However, given the history of the country, there is often a lack of trust between young people and adults. Faith communities are also well situated to facilitate reconciliation and more effective communication between the generations to create a new relationship of trust. Safe spaces can be created for peer groups and support mechanisms. These can also serve to develop young people's communication and relational skills that, in the long run, can contribute to social transformation. Faith communities can also assist in the creation of an educational system with clear values and norms, as well as a sound ethics (see Bentovin & Elton 1988:14).

Advocacy for alternative forms of discipline at home and in school can be performed by faith communities. Often, very harsh physical punishment is still the norm in communities and families. Faith communities can lobby for changes in laws and policy to reduce the violence perpetrated against children in the name of 'discipline'. Faith communities should facilitate discussions on those factors that contribute to the deterioration of living conditions, poverty, violence and multiple forms of discrimination. Faith communities in Mozambique should especially raise consciousness with regard to the detrimental effect of child marriage. It not only affects children, youth and women, but also perpetuates many societal problems as a social practice. From a theological perspective, it goes against the gospel message, and from a human rights perspective, it violates human dignity (see Nhanala 2015).

Faith communities should address the issue of discrimination against women, children and young people and promote their full participation in church and society and on all levels.

Faith communities themselves should be the example of how to fully involve women and young people in decision-making. Mission institutions, Christian schools, institutions of higher education and general agencies should evaluate their current programmes to ensure that all forms of gender-based discrimination are eliminated (see Olson 2017).

Church institutions in the country can cooperate with government institutions to develop a long-term integrated vision and strategy for providing consistent and quality services to vulnerable children. Each church should review and evaluate their investment in services for children. If they consolidate and stabilise funding streams, they can develop their capacity for identifying and responding effectively to emerging risks to vulnerable children. Church institutions can do much to meet the needs of orphans and vulnerable children, families and communities – a task that the government alone cannot accomplish sufficiently. Faith-based institutions can cooperate with governmental structures in the development of appropriate policies that protect the rights of children and youth and ensure adequate care for them. Orphaned and other vulnerable children should be effectively protected from all forms of abuse, violence, exploitation, trafficking and loss of their inheritance if their parents or guardians (e.g. grandparents) die (see Salter 2017).

Church structures can also provide counselling and psychosocial support to orphans and other vulnerable children. They can see to it that these children too are enrolled in schools and that they have equal access to shelter, sufficient nutrition, health care and other social services. Faith communities can be encouraged to identify and monitor vulnerable children who live in the households that are a cause for concern. They can provide invaluable support for orphaned children who live with relatives and those who live in church orphanages.

Bringing the gospel of God's redeeming, reconciling and transforming grace in Jesus Christ to those in need, including vulnerable children and those oppressed by poverty, remains the focal point of the work of faith communities. If suffering people are welcomed into a community of support and care and are strengthened spiritually, psychologically, socially and physically, the quality of their lives can be improved substantially.

The government and churches together should advocate for change in public policy and legislation in order that young people, especially girls, can be effectively and adequately protected. The government and churches should offer support services for women who have already been forced into child marriage and are now suffering the consequences. Faith communities can use religious media, such as radio and television, to disseminate the message that forced child marriage is a violation of human rights and should be brought to an end in order that both men and women can live their lives with dignity. The government can introduce the

necessary laws and policies to regulate the minimum age of marriage and mitigate the harmful reproductive health issues that impact on the lives of girls who were forced to marry prematurely (see Tvedten, Paulo & Rosário 2007).

Faith communities and churches have the advantage of a wide membership. This can be utilised on behalf of vulnerable children and young people. Church institutions have the advantage of being a conversational partner in high-level structures in society. This extends their influence to matters of policy and advocacy. In a country where government institutions are overwhelmed by the needs of the people, all partnerships and available resources should be utilised fully. Faith communities and church structures represent a formidable resource.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exist.

Author's contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

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