


Development cooperation and Neo-Pentecostal churches – A decolonial perspective

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Religion and development are a subject that has stimulated researchers in the recent past. Most of the religious role players in development within sub-Saharan Africa have been the historic missional churches, also known as the mainline churches – mostly founded by Euro-Western missionaries. Development with Neo-Pentecostal Churches (NPCs), who are part of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, is fairly a new area of research. The purpose of this article is to position NPCs as potential development partners that can work in cooperation with other stakeholders in advancing development in the South African context from a decolonial perspective. A literary review on Neo-Pentecostals as development actors, is the focus of this article, positioning them as ideal development partners that contribute towards social and economic capital of communities within the context of education. The article starts by defining a working definition of development, followed by a conceptual framework of Pentecostal tenets where Christ is saviour, healer, baptiser and soon coming king, together with the holistic African worldview which does not demarcate between the sacred and the secular. The outcome is that development in NPCs is spiritual development which starts from individual development that is accompanied by entrepreneurial skills and that Neo-Pentecostals have a contribution towards sustainable development as expressed in their practice of faith and theology which naturally gravitates towards development.

Contribution: Education, economics, and Pentecostalism highlight the importance of flexibility and versatility of Neo-Pentecostals in the discourse of sustainable development.

Keywords: Neo-Pentecostals; development; Sustainable Development Goals; Pentecostal theology; entrepreneurship and African worldview.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) website on sustainable development gives a historical background on the agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It relates how in the 1990s, world leaders met to set out developmental goals that would address the many ills of the global community among others poverty, inequality, education, health, and environmental sustainability, which were to be achieved by 2015. In 2015 an evaluation was done, and the target was set for 2030 with a focus moving from Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to SDGs. The reasons for the shift from MDGs to SDGs, among others, is that MDGs were a top-down approach with only experts involved in crafting the focus and scope of the development, whereas SDGs use a collaborative approach where 193 member states, scientists, the private sector actors, including civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), were involved (Death & Gabay 2015). Another reason for the shift was that MDGs were more aid-oriented from rich countries to poor countries, but SDGs are calling on all countries to take initiatives and develop their own internal strategies and goals for development and collaboration (Death & Gabay 2015). We are now in the last decade before 2030, and as much as there is some progress made, it is still a far cry to achieve the goals by 2030, especially in Africa which still has a high level of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, diseases, gender inequalities, clean water, and sanitation, to mention but a few. The names and numbering of the SDGs as set out in the UN website are: (1) No Poverty; (2) Zero Hunger; (3) Good Health and Well-being; (4) Quality Education; (5) Gender Equality; (6) Clean Water and Sanitation; (7) Affordable and Clean Energy; (8) Decent Work and Economic Growth; (9) Industry Innovation and Infrastructure; (10) Reduced Inequalities; (11) Sustainable Cities and Communities; (12) Responsible Consumption and Production; (13) Climate Action; (14) Life Below Water; (15) Life on Land; (16) Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; (17) Partnerships for the Goals (United Nations 2015). Based on the weight of the items listed above and the short timeline given, there is an urgent need to have cooperation with

more development actors within the global societal spectrum, including the religious sector, if we are to achieve the SDGs by 2030, hence the engagement with Neo-Pentecostal Churches (NPCs) as strategic partner.

Pentecostalism is a growing tradition within the religious sector with estimations of 644 million adherents by 2020 and projections of over a billion by 2050 (Zurlo, Johnson & Crossing 2020). This growth is evident especially in the global South where Africa is a part. Therefore, given the projected numbers, Pentecostals must play a substantial role in advancing development. It is in the light of the above that development cooperation with Neo-Pentecostals, who are part of the Pentecostal and Charismatic tradition, should be advanced.

Development cooperation with religious bodies has been a conversation that has been explored by academics since the turn of the millennium with numerous publications surfacing since then. The main role players in the subject of religion and development have been the historic mission churches also known as the mainline churches – mostly founded by western missionaries. However, development advances with African Independent Churches (AICs), where NPCs are a part, is fairly a new area of research (Öhlmann, Frost & Gräß 2016). There are a few scholars who have researched on the relationship between development and AICs; these are Bompani (2008, 2010), Freeman (2012), Öhlmann et al. (2016, 2020), Golo and Novieto (2021). This article will expand on existing literature with a specific focus on NPCs as potential development cooperation partners within the context of education as the 4th goal in the SDGs, presented as both a social and an economic capital for sustainable development in NPCs. A conceptual framework of Pentecostal tenets where Christ is presented as saviour, healer, baptiser and soon coming king, together with the holistic African worldview which does not demarcate between the sacred and the secular, is the framework that undergirds this article and one that is espoused by Neo-Pentecostals in their view of development.

The main aim of this article is to position NPCs as potential development partners that can work in cooperation with other stakeholders in advancing development within the South African context. This aim will be achieved through discussing the contribution of NPCs in development and their unique entrepreneurial approach which will contradict the narrative that they are 'other-worldly' and therefore not fit to be development partners (Golo & Novieto 2021:83).

The approach of this article will be based on a triangulation of an observer participant and a literature review. The former is based on the experience of the author as a founder in an NPC for over 25 years and is, therefore, conversant with this church tradition and its contribution and deficiencies in development. The literary analysis will help in bringing objectivity to a possible subjective approach by the author. A definition of the

concept of development will be discussed first, to set the scope of how development is used in this study.

Development

Development has always been a challenging concept to define into one concrete idea. It has been conventionally understood as an indicator to the economic growth of nations where the gross domestic product (GDP) is used as a measuring stick to determine the developmental needs of a nation (Gasper 2004:25, 36). This modernist notion changed in the 1990s to human development after noticing a failure for nations to develop, based on economic growth alone. This failure was because of the poverty levels not having improved despite the various attempts to boost the economy in several nations (Gasper 2004). The latter was also caused by some of Africa's corrupt governments who mismanaged the finances that were meant for the poor but never got to them, and did not even have proper management and monitoring systems and policies to ensure proper accountability of resources. The focus started shifting towards human development because of its social transformation aspect of producing healthy societies that are morally stable and spiritually sound (Golo 2019). Development can, therefore, be defined as an improved quality of life that individuals experience in satisfying their basic needs in a sustainable and empowering way (Simon & Närman 1999:21). This is achieved through proper coordinated socio-economic systems which enhance production of goods and services, quality education, improved institutions regulated by policies which facilitate growth and progress (Simon & Närman 1999:21). This study aligns with Simon and Närman's definition of development and will discuss NPCs' contribution to development through their engagement in quality education later in the article. But firstly, it is important at this stage to discuss how NPCs define development since they are the focus of the study. This will be done by discussing the theological tenets together with their African worldview which impacts on their perspective on development which formulates the conceptual framework of this study.

Development in Neo-Pentecostal theology

Development in NPCs is imbedded in their theology, as discussed by Dayton (1987) in his seminal work *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, where he presents four tenets of Pentecostal theology centred on Christ the saviour, healer, baptiser in the Spirit, and soon coming king.

On the first tenet, NPCs define salvation in developmental terms, as progress or transformation in terms of prosperity through health, employment, marriage, business, and wealth creation in the life of an individual or a nation (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Golo & Novieto 2021:76). This holistic perspective of salvation among African Neo-Pentecostals is influenced by their primal religious roots where salvation is understood as an 'empowerment of the individual self, the promotion of fertility, and success in life's ventures' (Maimela 1985:72). The African worldview that influences African Neo-

Pentecostals, does not demarcate between the secular and spiritual realities; hence, they view development as an integral part of one's salvation (Mbaya & Cezula 2016:7). Salvation is seen as covering the total well-being of an individual where one is saved not just from sin but also from poverty, disease, and all other misfortunes of life (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). This holistic approach to salvation, which is experienced in the family, spiritually, materially, emotionally, socially, politically, economically, and cosmically, positions NPCs as strategic development partners (Althouse 2003; Petersen 1996; Swoboda 2019; cf. Volf 1989; Yong 2005). The spiritual experience of salvation refers to the conventional repentance from a lifestyle of sin to one of righteousness. Material salvation refers to the transformation from a state of poverty, oppression, and marginalisation (Volf 1989). Social salvation refers to the transformation of the political and socio-economic conditions of society (Petersen 1996). Cosmic salvation refers to the ecological transformation of the environment from an ecologically hostile environment to one that is eco-friendly (Swoboda 2019). Family salvation refers to the transformation of the entire family, committing their lives to be followers of Christ (Yong 2005). Neo-Pentecostal Churches advocate and administer this holistic salvation to individuals in their churches who, in turn, impact their families, communities, and neighbourhoods, which further enhances the process of development.

The second tenet in Pentecostal theology is healing. Healing is also approached holistically where 'the transformation of the personality would be manifest in personal health, wellbeing, and care...' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:408). Healing is a big subject among AICs where NPCs are a part, and it does not only address physical healing but also economic healing, social healing, as well as spiritual healing (cf. Bowers-Du Toit 2020:316; Öhlmann et al. 2016:5). Neo-Pentecostal Churches' healing ministry is mostly centred around deliverance from malevolent spirits which do not just harm the body through sickness and disease, but are also perceived to harm the economic development of individuals; as a result, spiritual warfare, through prayer, is waged against demons of poverty and underdevelopment (cf. Anderson 2004; Gukurume 2020:269, 276; Myers 2015, 116). The latter is an attractive view to Africans, and it is the cause for the stupendous growth of African Neo-Pentecostals who see development within the context of their spiritual experience, which is how most primal religions view the world (Atiemo 2017; Myers 2015; Nel 2019:6). As an observer participant, the author can relate to the views raised by the literature and has witnessed how NPC congregants respond with heightened enthusiasm in prayer meetings where the focus is on praying against spirits that hinder personal development, more than a general prayer focus.

The third tenet of Pentecostal theology is the role of the Spirit in NPCs, where the Spirit is not only limited to the experience of glossolalia (Ac 2:1-4), but the role of the Spirit can be multidimensional, impacting the material, social, political, cosmic, and family aspects in the life of individuals in African NPCs, because in the African perspective there is no

difference between the material and the spiritual, all are interconnected (Mbaya & Cezula 2016:7; Öhlmann et al. 2016). African NPCs have a particular sensitivity to the spirit world where everything is seen through a spirit prism such that their critics refer to them as those who 'see a spirit behind every bush' (Anderson 1991). Poverty and lack of development is perceived as driven by a malevolent spirit as alluded already above; therefore, everything material has a spiritual cause. Development can be seen as driven by a benevolent spirit whereas underdevelopment can be caused by a malevolent spirit, hence their engagement in prayer vigils in what they call a 'spiritual warfare' against spirits of poverty and lack of development, a 'notion that captures hearts and minds much more energetically than the rhetoric of the war against poverty' (Freeman 2012:2). 'Spirit of poverty' is a common phrase that is used by NPCs in most of their preaching and teaching; and the word 'spirit' can also be attached to anything good or bad including the spirit of ignorance – when referring to a lack of education, spirit of laziness, jealousy, the spirit of joy, peace, success, among others. This demonstrates the pneumatic paradigm of NPCs which is imbedded in their thinking and vocabulary.

The fourth tenet deals with the Parousia which, from a traditional premillennial outlook, is anti-development. Neo-Pentecostal Churches, however, unlike classical Pentecostals, are more inclined towards a victorious eschatology which purports an optimistic end of the world, where the influence of the church and its gospel message impacts the world in a positive way rather than the pessimistic premillennial end of the world (Frost 2021:108). Althouse (2006) shed more light on this optimistic eschatological perspective by highlighting the transformational eschatology of Moltmann, where he argues that the concepts of the new earth and heaven do not mean the annihilation of the earth, as we know it, but its transformation. This is the same transformation that happened in the biblical narrative of the flood of Noah, where the earth was not annihilated but was transformed, just as the case was also with the resurrection of Jesus, where his body was not annihilated at death but was transformed. Neo-Pentecostal Churches' eschatological view, in praxis, reveals an inclination towards this transformative eschatology rather than a pessimistic premillennial view. This positions NPCs as better developmental partners. African NPCs can relate better to a transformational eschatology because of their African perspective on death, where the dead are not annihilated but they continue in another life, as ancestors who are believed to still affect the affairs of this present life which is ably captured by Mbiti in his expression of the 'living dead' (Mbiti 2015:125). Although in praxis, NPCs in South Africa would never embrace the concept of the dead affecting the living, they are more likely to understand the concept of transformational eschatology by reason of being African and, therefore, knowledgeable about the African perception of death, as transition than annihilation. The holistic nature of the four tenets of Pentecostal theology, from an African perspective, conceptualises their view and involvement in education.

Neo-Pentecostal Churches' engagement in education

The empirical research done by Öhlmann et al. reveals that AICs of which NPCs are part, are mostly involved with SDGs 1–4 and 16, where Education as SDG #4 is most prominent (Öhlmann et al. 2019:25). The findings of the data reveal that out of 60 interviews, there were 42 churches that were running schools, emphasising the involvement of NPCs in education. Literature also supports this finding, indicating that NPCs are running learning centres from early childhood to primary and secondary schools all the way to private tertiary institutions (Adeboye 2020; Gukurume 2020). The involvement of NPCs in education is a form of a social capital, because it does not only equip society with knowledge, but it also serves as a way of keeping young people and children out of harm's way and idle minds. The latter are a deterrent to the personal development of young people and society because they lead to mischief, criminal behaviour, and drug abuse.

Neo-Pentecostal Churches' involvement in education does not just act as a social capital for many communities but also as an economic capital, by creating employment for the staff in learning centres, from pre-schools to universities. This is especially helpful in South Africa because of the high unemployment rate which currently stands at 32.6% (Stats SA 2023). This job creation, although giving an economic boost to many struggling families, further serves the social capital by restoring dignity to poor families where their employed family members can start providing necessities for themselves and their families.

Furthermore, NPCs use this vehicle of learning centres as a tool to generate income so that they remain financially viable as churches. This proved to be helpful, especially during and after the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic which affected church attendance, as a result, the finances of most NPCs were negatively affected (Mhandu & Ojong 2021). The concept of learning centres as income generating institutions is motivated by the ideals of improving the quality of life in sustaining basic needs of individuals to lead a prosperous life, which is what development is all about, based on the definition of development given by Simon and Närman (1999) as stated above. When the motivation for prosperity is channelled into personal transformation, it can become a great tool for development rather than exploitation (Frost 2021). The transformation of the mind seems to be a priority among Neo-Pentecostals, hence their engagement in education, no matter the size of the church (Öhlmann et al. 2019:25). In NPCs, educating the society starts with an individual, hence their emphasis on personal transformation in their teachings to their members which results into societal transformation that has direct impact on development. Individuals are not only taught academic lessons but spiritual lessons too, by teaching them about positive confessions, self-motivation, self-reliance, self-worth, which gives them a positive outlook on life and a tenacity to pursue success despite the odds of life (Golo & Novieto 2021: 88).

This commitment to teaching academic and spiritual lessons is seen as spiritual development by NPCs because to them spiritual development is development.

Spiritual development as development

The empirical research findings by Öhlmann et al. (2016) on AICs of which Neo-Pentecostals are a part, reveal that spiritual development, is part of development, further emphasising the African view which does not separate between the sacred and the secular. This is arguably a decolonial view of development because it engages the spiritual element as a key component of development, something which is very foreign to conventional Euro-Western perspectives about development.

Spiritual development focusses on the individual and their personal transformation, starting with their conversion from a lifestyle of being a heathen into an experience of being a devoted Christian, also known as being 'born again' (Adedibu 2020: 143). This 'born again' experience of an individual transforms the moral behaviour from a lascivious lifestyle of wild parties and orgies to that of chastity, sanctity, and deference to others and to self (Myers 2015). The 'born again' individual is encouraged to be industrious, self-disciplined, and to invest finances into profitable business ventures and in education while being generous to others and to the church, which will result into that individual's prosperity (Gukurume 2020:270, 271). There are, however, distortions of the prosperity message where members part with lots of money to enrich the individual prophets who are founders or leaders of some NPC congregations, who exploit individuals in the name of sowing material 'seeds' to reap a great harvest of prosperity (Haynes 2012). Prosperity in this article is not used in the context of the prosperity gospel, but it is used within the context of the definition of development by Simon and Närman (1991), as already stated above, to improve the quality of life by meeting the basic needs of individuals so that they flourish in all areas of their lives (Asamoah-Gyadu 2020:33). The individual's spiritual development is seen as a major strategy for societal development because of the sphere of influence that individual is connected to, which includes his family, friends, colleagues, and the community they live in. The major role players and catalyst of development in NPCs are their entrepreneurial pastors who can mobilise their followers into development actors through various entrepreneurial ventures.

Entrepreneurial nature of Neo-Pentecostal Church

Most successful Neo-Pentecostals are blessed with leaders who are entrepreneurial in their leadership style to a point where they can be compared with CEOs of corporate business (Frahm-Arp 2010:110). This entrepreneurial skill is also passed on to the youth and the rest of the congregation through seminars on how to generate and manage finances (Kgatlle 2020:6). Within Pentecostalism, there are various

expressions that show a high inclination on entrepreneurial ventures, others for personal enrichment especially those who are referred to as the New Prophetic Churches, like Prophet Shepherd Bushiri of Enlightened Christian Gathering, in Pretoria; and Alf Lukau of Alleluia Ministries, in Sandton, among others (Kgatle 2020). There are also those who are entrepreneurial with integrous intentions, to better the lives of their members and communities like: Bishop Mosa Sono of Grace Bible church in, Soweto, South Africa; Rev. Chris Mathebula of Hope Restoration Ministries in Thembisa, South Africa; and Pastor Titus Sithole of Charity and Faith Mission, in Mamelodi, South Africa (Matshobane 2023).

Among these integrous entrepreneurial NPC pastors, the congregation led by Pastor Titus Sithole is worth noting because of how it embodies development among NPCs. Pastor Sithole and his wife Sibongile Sithole founded their congregation in 1984 in a township of Mamelodi that has a population of over 350 000 people. Their mission as found in their website is to convert sinners to be followers of Christ, then disciple them to discover their personal mission, which they do through various developmental programmes (Charity and Faith Mission 2023). They are involved in education not just for their members but for the community of Mamelodi, by running a pre-school from the ages 3 years to 5 years and a school that offers Grade 1 to Grade 12 schooling. They are also involved in the health sector where they are running a community centre called Bophelong community centre – translated from the Sesotho language to mean a place that gives and sustains life. In this centre, they run free medical clinics which include dental and eye care, general health care, and counselling for HIV and AIDS. They also take care of the vulnerable members of their community, including children's home for orphaned children, a hospice for terminally ill individuals, an old age home centre for the aged, and a disability house built for those who have physical and mental disabilities.

According to their 20 years celebration newsletter, they are not just servicing their own community, but they help other churches that are not linked to them to do the same within their own contexts. Their understanding of ministry is epitomised in their name, which has two elements interlinked as one mission – Charity and Faith. The name Charity represents development, while Faith is seen as an expression of salvation, which demonstrates how they are holistic in their theology and as strategic development actors. The latter indicates the potential NPCs have in developing society when they can all adopt elements of what Charity and Faith Mission is doing.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to position NPCs as potential development partners that can work in cooperation with other stakeholders in advancing development in the South African context from a decolonial perspective. This purpose has been achieved by doing a literary analysis of the involvement of NPCs as development actors which affirmed

NPCs as important partners in the development discourse. The working definition of development that this article adopted is a quest for an improved quality life which enables individuals to meet their basic needs in a sustainable and empowering way. This definition has been affirmed by the praxis of NPCs in their holistic interpretation of theological tenets. This article added to the literature the social and economic capital that NPCs bring into development within the education sector, using the conceptual framework of Pentecostal theology from an African worldview which embraces spirituality as development. Spiritual development in NPCs focusses on the development of an individual who influences their community through various creative entrepreneurial ways. This entrepreneurial approach is systematically taught and modelled by NPC pastors who are themselves entrepreneurial and are committed to teaching their congregants how to be industrious. The example of Charity and Faith Mission was used as a case study that models the potential that NPCs carry in advancing development and places them as pivotal partners to the advancement of development in African society.

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Author's contributions

M.M.M. declared sole authorship of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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