



'Leave no one behind': Towards a religion and disability-inclusive development in Africa



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Dates:

Received: 20 Nov. 2024

Accepted: 11 Mar. 2025

Published: 22 Apr. 2025

How to cite this article:

Nanthambwe, P. & Magezi, V., 2025, "'Leave no one behind': Towards a religion and disability-inclusive development in Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10399. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10399>

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The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) encapsulate the idea of 'leaving no one behind' in development. Religion plays a crucial role in these development efforts. The promise and call to leave no one behind brings hope to previously marginalised and discriminated people, particularly those living with visible disabilities. The question in this case is: Is the central promise to leave no one behind realistic for Africans with visible disabilities living on the African continent? Is the idea and narrative of addressing disability under Global South discourses helpful for those living on the African continent? Are African religions embraced in this narrative? Drawing on previous literature on religion, disability, and development, this article explores these three intersecting questions by addressing the unique contribution of religion in achieving the inclusion of people with disabilities in Africa's development agenda. Such an undertaking is premised on the realisation that 'religion in Africa' is at the heart of the African ontological experience and thus cannot be ignored in development efforts.

Contribution: This article contributes to advocating for the inclusion of Africans with disabilities in sustainable development, emphasising the pivotal role of African religions, particularly Christianity, in addressing marginalisation. It enriches discourse on disability, religion, and development in Africa by critically examining how Global South narratives align with indigenous African contexts and priorities.

Keywords: religion; disability; inclusion; development; Africa; Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have committed to a core principle of inclusive development, whereby no individual or group is excluded from the benefits of progress (United Nations [UN] 2015, 2016). This is summed up in the overarching idea of 'leaving no one behind' (UN 2015, 2016). The commitment and imperative to ensure inclusivity in sustainable development instils optimism among historically excluded and disadvantaged individuals, particularly those with disabilities (UN 2019; World Health Organization [WHO] 2015). There is a persistent body of literature indicating that persons with disabilities face a multitude of challenges within societal contexts (Babik & Gardner 2021; Bonaccio et al. 2020; Chataika 2019; Opoku et al. 2019). Thus, it is crucial to establish deliberate intervention initiatives to provide individuals with the essential resources to overcome marginalisation.

The SDGs initiative is a comprehensive structure to support nations and benefactors in alleviating poverty and promoting universal well-being (Opoku et al. 2019). According to a report by the UN (2019:2), persons with disabilities face more significant challenges in their daily lives than individuals without disabilities. The difficulties stem from societal impediments such as bias, limited entry to educational and occupational prospects, and insufficient integration in communal initiatives and means of subsistence (UN 2019).

While the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a widely recognised framework that aims to advance worldwide peace and prosperity and safeguard the planet's welfare (UN 2015), achieving a better future relies on the full participation of all members of society, including individuals with disabilities. Guaranteeing the comprehensive incorporation and safeguarding of the entitlements of the worldwide populace of one billion persons with disabilities is not solely a moral duty but also a practical necessity.

Sustainable Development Goal 17 is devoted to coordinating different development players to ensure the effective implementation of SDGs. It aims to 'encourage and promote effective public,

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public-private, and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships' (UN 2017:n.p.). In these partnerships, the question to ponder by religious development actors is: Can religion (African religion in particular) be a tool in which the SDGs can be realised by the marginalised society, including persons with disabilities? Tomalin, Haustein and Kidy (2019) note that 'since the early 2000s, there has been a "turn to religion" in global development policy and practice, recognising the importance of religion in development'. Despite the increased role of religion in development, religious actors have limited involvement. Öhlmann et al. (2022) observe a worrying silence regarding the inclusion of religion by the UN in the SDGs. Öhlmann et al. (2022) indicate that:

The role of religion is largely ignored in the SDGs. There are only two minimal references to it, as religious freedom (Paragraph 19) and religious non-discrimination (Target 10.2), in the context of several other individual freedoms. Thus, the Agenda for Sustainable Development fails to adequately take into account the increasing global relevance of religion (and its fundamental importance in and influence on the lives, worldviews and actions of people across the globe) and the major work of religious organisations in the development and humanitarian sectors. This neglect of religion is a crucial point for engagement. (p.4)

Öhlmann et al. (2022) observe that religion is frequently marginalised in development discourse, often regarded as inconsequential to societal progress, particularly within the broader global trend of diminishing the value of humanities and social sciences. Similarly, Deneulin and Masooda (2009), in their book *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script*, highlight the exclusion of religion in development debates, linking this neglect to the broader devaluation of humanities and social sciences.

The present investigation pertains to the plausibility of the central commitment to inclusivity – which aims to ensure that no individual is excluded – for Africans with discernible disabilities who reside within the African continent. Can the conceptualisation and discourse surrounding disability within the context of the Global South provide utility to individuals living within the African continent? Do African religions feature in this discourse?

This article examines the function of religion in advancing the integration of persons with disabilities into the development agenda in Africa. To attain this goal, the article utilises pre-existing scholarly works on religion, disability, and development. The article investigates three interlocking issues by analysing religion's unique and noteworthy impact. The article assumes that religion in Africa occupies a pivotal position in the African ontological framework and should not be overlooked by assimilating it into other exotic religions that bear colonial implications under the pretext of the Global South.

The introductory section of the article provides an overview of the fundamental notions of sustainable development, religion, and disability. Subsequently, the article elucidates

the progress of the SDGs for individuals with disabilities in the Global South, specifically focusing on the African continent. The article will also examine the role of religion in African societies and explore how comprehending African religions can facilitate the attainment of SDGs. Finally, the article will delineate pragmatic approaches through which the African church can guarantee that individuals with disabilities are not excluded from attaining a high quality of life for societies.

Theoretical framework of the study

This study adopts the social model of disability and the capability approach to explore the intersection of religion, disability, and development in Africa. These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how inclusive development can align with the 'leave no one behind' principle, a core commitment of the UN SDGs. Both models shift the focus from individual impairments to broader social structures and human flourishing, offering critical lenses for analysing the role of religion in fostering disability-inclusive development.

The social model of disability, first articulated by Oliver (1990), asserts that disability is not simply a result of physical or mental impairments but is primarily shaped by societal barriers that restrict the full participation of individuals with impairments. This model challenges the dominant medical approach, which tends to view disability through a deficit lens, by emphasising how social environments create exclusion. In the African context, the social model highlights structural inequalities – such as inaccessible infrastructure, discriminatory cultural attitudes, and a lack of inclusive policies – that hinder the participation of people with disabilities in development processes (Chataika 2019). Religious communities, as central social institutions in Africa, are often complicit in perpetuating exclusionary practices (Bowa 2022 2024), but they can also serve as transformative spaces for challenging stigma and advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities (Magezi 2019). Therefore, analysing how religious beliefs, practices, and institutions either reinforce or dismantle societal barriers is essential to understanding the potential of religion in inclusive development.

Complementing the social model, the capability approach, developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and further elaborated by Nussbaum (2000), provides a normative framework for evaluating well-being and justice. The approach shifts the focus of development from economic growth to enhancing people's substantive freedoms – their capabilities to do and be what they value. This approach is particularly relevant to disability inclusion, as it recognises that people with disabilities may require different resources and support systems to achieve equal opportunities. In the African context, where poverty, social exclusion, and a lack of access to services often intersect with disability, the capabilities approach highlights the importance of empowering individuals and communities to participate fully in society.

Religion plays a pivotal role in this process by providing social networks, emotional support, and advocacy platforms that can expand the capabilities of persons with disabilities (Deneulin & Rakodi 2011). However, religious institutions can also restrict capabilities through exclusionary practices or theological teachings that associate disability with sin or divine punishment (Bowa 2022, 2024; Sande 2019).

The integration of these two theories provides a comprehensive framework for examining the role of religion in disability-inclusive development. The social model of disability underscores the need to remove structural barriers that limit participation, while the capability approach emphasises the promotion of agency and well-being. This dual framework enables a critical analysis of how religion can either hinder or enhance the capabilities of persons with disabilities, depending on the practices, teachings, and advocacy efforts of religious communities. Furthermore, this theoretical foundation aligns with the African communitarian philosophy of *ubuntu*, which emphasises collective well-being and social inclusion (Gathogo 2007). *Ubuntu* reinforces the view that addressing disability requires a community-orientated approach, where religious communities play a vital role in ensuring that no one is left behind.

By adopting this integrated theoretical framework, the study advances a religion and disability-inclusive developmental approach that positions religious institutions as both critical stakeholders and potential agents of social transformation in Africa. This approach contributes to ongoing debates in public theology and development studies, advocating for recognising religion as a resource for fostering inclusive, equitable, and participatory development outcomes. Thus, the next section discusses the place of disability in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Disability in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges disability as a crucial cross-cutting issue in achieving sustainable development. The UN (2019) defines disability as a restriction in a functional domain arising from the interaction between an individual's intrinsic capacities and environmental or social barriers. This perspective aligns with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which recognises that disability results from the dynamic interplay between impairments and societal attitudes or environmental barriers that hinder full participation in society (UN 2006).

The inclusion of disability within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development marks a significant shift in global development discourse, particularly in response to the shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The adoption of the SDGs in 2015 represents a more inclusive and transformative approach to global development, underpinned by the commitment to 'leave no one behind' (UN 2015). However, the practical realisation of this vision –

especially in the Global South, including Africa – remains a critical issue, particularly regarding the inclusion of persons with disabilities. This section discusses how disability emerges as a cross-cutting issue in the SDGs, its significance within the development agenda, and the challenges faced in translating policy commitments into tangible outcomes in Africa.

The SDGs were formulated in response to the limitations of the MDGs, which were the first globally coordinated effort to address poverty and improve human well-being at the turn of the 21st century. While the MDGs made notable strides in poverty alleviation, maternal health, and education, they were widely criticised for their narrow focus on quantitative targets and their neglect of marginalised populations, including persons with disabilities (WHO 2015). According to Chataika (2019:1), the exclusion of disability from the MDGs significantly hindered the eradication of poverty, given that people with disabilities constitute approximately 15% of the global population (WHO & World Bank 2011). The omission of disability-related concerns from the MDGs reinforced the marginalisation of persons with disabilities, perpetuating inequalities and limiting their access to development resources.

The formulation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sought to rectify these gaps by adopting a more comprehensive and inclusive approach. The agenda, which consists of 17 interlinked goals, is guided by the principle of 'leaving no one behind', emphasising the need to prioritise the most vulnerable and marginalised populations, including persons with disabilities (UN 2015). The foreword to the Disability and Development Report by António Guterres (UN 2019) states the following:

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the world's globally agreed plan for peace and prosperity for all on a healthy planet. But this vision of a better future can only be achieved with the full participation of everyone, including persons with disabilities. Upholding the rights and ensuring the full inclusion of the world's 1 billion persons with disabilities is not only a moral imperative, but a practical necessity. (n.p.)

Guterres's statement (UN 2019) suggests an optimistic future for individuals with disabilities. The pressing question is how this is realised in the Global South, particularly in Africa. To answer this question, a brief background of the SDGs is important to help set the foundation for the UN claim of 'leaving no one behind'.

Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs explicitly reference persons with disabilities in several targets, reflecting a more inclusive approach to development. Disability is mentioned in 5 of the 17 goals, which cover critical areas such as (UN 2015):

- SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education (Target 4.5).
- SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all (Target 8.5).
- SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries (Target 10.2).

- SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (Target 11.2 and 11.7).
- SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development through data collection and monitoring (Target 17.18).

However, while these explicit references signal progress, disability is not confined to specific goals but rather emerges as a cross-cutting issue across the entire development agenda (Brolan 2016). Many of the broader goals – such as poverty eradication (SDG 1), health and well-being (SDG 3), and gender equality (SDG 5) – are inherently linked to disability inclusion. For instance, poverty disproportionately affects persons with disabilities, with many facing higher rates of unemployment, limited access to healthcare, and social exclusion (UN 2019). Therefore, the success of the entire SDG agenda hinges on the mainstreaming of disability inclusion across all development sectors.

Despite the inclusive language of the SDGs, significant implementation gaps persist, particularly in the African context. Research by Chataika (2019) highlights that African nations continue to lag in providing adequate services and opportunities for persons with disabilities. One of the most pressing challenges is the gap between policy formulation and implementation. While many African countries have ratified international conventions such as the CRPD and have adopted progressive disability laws, the translation of these commitments into tangible outcomes remains limited (African Union 2018).

Chataika's (2019) study on the Continental Plan of Action (CPoA) revealed that most African Union Member States score highly in policy development but perform poorly in implementation. This discrepancy is often attributed to limited financial resources, a lack of political will, and insufficient technical capacity. Moreover, many African countries have yet to fully integrate disability-sensitive budgeting and inclusive governance structures into their national development plans.

Another challenge is the attitudinal and cultural barriers that persist in many African societies. Negative perceptions of disability, often reinforced by religious beliefs, continue to undermine the social inclusion of persons with disabilities. Such attitudes manifest in discriminatory practices, social stigma, and exclusion from community participation, particularly in rural areas where religious and traditional worldviews are deeply embedded.

While the SDGs represent a significant improvement over the MDGs, some scholars argue that the current framework remains insufficient in addressing the structural inequalities faced by persons with disabilities. Brolan (2016:14) cautions that the mere inclusion of disability in the SDGs could serve as a symbolic gesture rather than a transformative agenda. The absence of disability-specific indicators in the SDG monitoring framework raises concerns about the enforceability

of the commitments made by member states. Without precise mechanisms for tracking progress and holding governments accountable, there is a risk that persons with disabilities will continue to be marginalised in development processes.

Moreover, the implementation of the SDGs in Africa cannot be separated from broader discussions about the political economy of development assistance. Many African countries rely heavily on international funding to achieve their development targets, which often limits their capacity to prioritise disability inclusion. According to Chataika (2019), the lack of domestic resource mobilisation and ownership of the disability agenda further exacerbates this challenge.

Addressing these challenges requires a more holistic approach that combines policy reforms, community-based initiatives, and the active involvement of religious institutions. The UN (2019) emphasises that achieving the SDGs is a collective responsibility that requires the participation of all stakeholders. Religious communities in Africa, as influential social actors, have the potential to play a pivotal role in advocating for disability rights, challenging social stigma, and providing inclusive services.

Moreover, integrating the social model of disability and the capability approach into development planning can help bridge the gap between policy and practice. The social model highlights the need to remove societal barriers, while the capability approach focuses on empowering individuals to participate fully in society. By aligning religious practices with these theoretical frameworks, religious communities can become key partners in promoting disability-inclusive development.

Disability inclusion in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a critical step towards a more equitable and inclusive world. However, the realisation of this vision remains an ongoing challenge, particularly in the African context where structural, attitudinal, and economic barriers persist. The analysis highlights that while the SDGs have elevated disability on the global development agenda, significant gaps remain in their implementation and monitoring. Bridging these gaps requires a multi-stakeholder approach that involves governments, civil society, religious communities, and persons with disabilities themselves. As the world moves towards the 2030 deadline, the role of religion in promoting disability-inclusive development deserves greater attention in Africa, offering both theological and practical resources for advancing the well-being of all members of society.

The exclusion and marginalisation of persons with disabilities in contemporary African communities: A cause for concern

The exclusion and marginalisation of persons with disabilities in contemporary African communities represent a significant

social challenge that undermines the vision of inclusive development as articulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Bowa 2024). Despite international frameworks such as the CRPD and the SDGs, which promote the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities, the lived realities of this population in many African societies continue to be characterised by heightened poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination (Chataika 2019; UN 2019). The marginalisation of persons with disabilities is not merely a reflection of individual impairments but is deeply embedded in structural, cultural, and religious factors that perpetuate exclusion. This section discusses the multifaceted nature of this exclusion, with particular attention to how poverty, social attitudes, and religious beliefs have shaped the marginalisation of persons with disabilities in contemporary African societies.

Poverty and social exclusion as interlocking realities

Poverty and disability are intricately linked, with each reinforcing the other in what is commonly referred to as the disability-poverty cycle (International Labour Organization, 2014). In many African communities, persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected by poverty due to limited access to education, employment opportunities, and social services (Chataika 2019). The WHO and World Bank (2011) estimate that 15% of the global population lives with some form of disability, with the majority residing in developing regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. The lack of inclusive infrastructure, coupled with discriminatory employment practices, significantly curtails the ability of persons with disabilities to participate in the labour market, further exacerbating their vulnerability to poverty.

The intersection of poverty and disability often results in the exclusion of persons with disabilities from community life and decision-making processes. As Eskay et al. (2012) argue, in many African communities, individuals with disabilities are perceived as dependents rather than active contributors to society. This perception reinforces their exclusion from education, political participation, and economic activities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and social marginalisation. The lack of social protection systems and accessible public services further compounds the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, leaving them at the margins of society.

Social stigma and discriminatory attitudes

Social attitudes towards disability play a critical role in shaping the experiences of persons with disabilities in African communities. Across many African cultures, disability is often viewed through the lens of misfortune, weakness, or even divine punishment (Abang 1988; Ingstad & Whyte 1995). These perceptions stem from deeply rooted cultural beliefs that associate disability with supernatural causes such as witchcraft, curses, or ancestral displeasure (Sande 2019). Such negative perceptions not only foster

stigma and discrimination but also erode the self-worth and agency of persons with disabilities.

Shakespeare (2012) describes how individuals with disabilities are often treated as 'dustbins for avowal', serving as receptacles for the projection of society's anxieties about frailty, weakness, and imperfection. This stigmatisation manifests in various forms, including social isolation, verbal abuse, and even the denial of basic rights such as education and healthcare. In some communities, persons with disabilities are hidden away by their families out of shame or fear of social judgement, further exacerbating their exclusion. This prevailing social stigma highlights the urgent need for transformative approaches that challenge negative perceptions and promote the dignity and rights of persons with disabilities.

Religion and the reinforcement of negative attitudes towards disability

Religion holds a significant place in African societies, shaping cultural norms, social practices, and community life. However, religious beliefs have historically played a paradoxical role in shaping attitudes towards disability. On the one hand, religious traditions can serve as powerful platforms for promoting human dignity, compassion, and inclusion. On the other hand, certain religious interpretations have reinforced negative attitudes and discriminatory practices against persons with disabilities (Shodipo 2023).

Many African religious traditions, both indigenous and Christian, have interpreted disability as a consequence of divine punishment, ancestral curses, or spiritual impurity (Chitando 2009; Sande 2019). Such beliefs not only frame disability as a moral failing but also perpetuate the view that persons with disabilities are objects of pity rather than subjects with agency. In some cases, religious leaders have been complicit in fostering these perceptions by preaching messages that link disability to sin or spiritual deficiency. This theologically grounded stigma has had profound implications on the lives of persons with disabilities, reinforcing their marginalisation and exclusion from religious communities and broader society (Bowa 2022:187; Sande 2019:3).

However, recent theological discourses have begun to challenge these narratives by advocating for more inclusive and liberative interpretations of religious teachings. Shodipo (2023) argues for the adoption of the partnership model of disability, which encourages collaborative relationships between religious communities and persons with disabilities to promote inclusion and social justice. Similarly, Creamer (2008) calls for a theological reimagining of disability that recognises the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities.

The exclusion and marginalisation of persons with disabilities in contemporary African communities present a pressing cause for concern that demands urgent attention. Addressing

this issue requires a multifaceted approach that dismantles structural barriers, challenges social stigma, and harnesses the positive potential of religion in promoting inclusion. While the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a valuable framework for advancing the rights of persons with disabilities, its successful implementation hinges on the active participation of all societal stakeholders, including religious communities.

As one of the most influential social institutions in Africa, religion has both the moral responsibility and the practical capacity to serve as a catalyst for disability inclusion. By challenging harmful theological narratives and promoting the dignity and agency of persons with disabilities, religious communities can play a transformative role in fostering more inclusive societies. This study argues that an integrated developmental approach that engages religious communities as partners in promoting disability rights has the potential to break the cycles of exclusion and marginalisation, contributing to the realisation of the 'leave no one behind' principle in Africa's development agenda.

Why religion matters in achieving disability-inclusive development?

Religion is integral to millions of lives across Africa (Agbiji & Swart 2015; Magezi 2022; Ndemanu 2018). According to Mbiti (1999:1), there exists a rigorous commitment among Africans towards religion, wherein religion is deeply ingrained in all aspects of life to the extent that it cannot be easily or feasibly separated from it (Mbiti 1999). South African History Online (SAHO 2019) has stated that every day, a significant number of African individuals embrace Christianity, while in Nigeria, approximately 20 new religious sects or groups are established monthly. Every week, a substantial number of Jews, exceeding 10 million from various regions of the world, engage in the observance of the Sabbath. Millions of Muslim pilgrims journey to Mecca in the Middle East every year. Individuals engage in such practices due to their adherence to religious doctrines, which serve as a moral compass and influence their daily conduct.

Mbiti (1999) asserted that the definition of religion poses a challenge. He (Mbiti 1999) posits that delineating the concept of religion within the framework of African traditional culture presents an even more significant challenge. Notwithstanding the challenge, Mbiti (1999) maintains that religion holds an ontological significance for Africans, as it relates to the fundamental inquiry of existence or being (Mbiti 1999:15). Religion is characterised by a set of behavioural norms that provide direction for social interaction and is frequently structured and implemented within a communal context, rather than as an individual or private matter. In African societies, there is a pervasive belief that life is a unified entity and that religion plays a fundamental role in all facets of existence. From a conceptual standpoint, the integration of individual components is achieved through the cohesive nature of the entirety. The notion of compartmentalisation or dichotomisation of human existence

is deemed non-existent. The division between matter and spirit, soul and body, and religious practice and daily life is not apparent.

Showing the importance of African religion in African culture, Gathogo (2007:164–165) presents the following:

- Cultivates the whole person. For example, African religion permeates all departments of life.
- Provides people with a view of the world, e.g., the views of the universe.
- Answers some questions that nothing else can, e.g., unlike science, it has no limitations. Does God exist? Theodicy, suffering, purpose of human life, etc.
- It provides humanity with moral values by which to live, e.g., it tells us right and wrong, what is good and evil, just and unjust, virtue and vice, etc.
- It gives food for spiritual hunger, e.g., it provides spiritual insights, prayers, rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices and offerings, dedication, devotion, and trust in God, among other religious discourses.
- It has inspired great ideas, e.g., moral life, cultural achievements, etc.
- It is a means of communication, e.g., through prayer, sacrifice, common myths, legends, morals, and views.
- It pays attention to the key moments in the life of the individual, e.g., birth, initiation, puberty, marriage, and death. In so doing, it shows the value/concern of the individual.
- It celebrates life, e.g., they dance life, 'ceremonise', 'festivise', etc – thereby affirming life.
- It shows people their limitations, e.g., that life is short, temporal hence the need to depend on the Creator.

Gathogo's (2007) depiction of religion in the African context illustrates that in traditional African societies, individuals are deeply engaged in religious practices that commence before birth and persist beyond death. According to Mbiti (1999:1), the African perspective holds that existence is intertwined with a spiritual narrative.

The significance of religion for Africans is paramount, as individuals inhabit an inherently religious world. A religious perspective is commonly employed to observe and encounter the universe and human activities. According to Mbiti's (1999) perspective, the African worldview posits that existence is a religious phenomenon. Therefore, being present in a religious universe implies one is inherently religious. From this perspective, it is inconceivable for an individual of African descent to exist without a religious framework. The philosophical comprehension of African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions, and social relationships is influenced by this religious perspective, as stated by Mbiti (1999:15). Kalu (2010) posits that the African worldview, which is predominantly infused with religious beliefs, is the underlying factor for the presence of religion in political and socio-economic spheres. Chitando et al. (2013:5) argued that the tendency of Africans to turn to religion without conscious awareness is indicative of the profound extent to which

religious consciousness is embedded in the African psyche. Magezi and Kholopa (2021:20) concur with Chitando et al. (2013) in stating that religion influences politics because humans are social beings, and community organisation is viewed as the basis of existence. Hence, it is a prevalent practice among Africans to manifest their religious convictions and observances during jubilation and adversity. The expression of religiosity is a vital aspect of African culture, as it is observed that individuals on the continent exhibit a heightened sense of vitality and engagement when engaging in religious practices. According to Agbiji and Swart (2015:3), African expressions, names, activities, symbols, celebrations, work, ideology, and philosophies are imbued with religious significance.

Religion in Africa also encourages the notion of *ubuntu* (Magezi & Kholopa 2021:3). In contrast to Western culture, which tends to prioritise individualism, African culture places greater emphasis on altruism, valuing the community over a singular perspective. Promoting *ubuntu* elements as the fundamental basis of religion is apparent in African religious practices (Magezi & Kholopa 2021:20).

In 2017, the Sustainable Development Goals Centre for Africa (SDGCA) issued a statement that phrased the matter as follows:

The pursuit of sustainable development is the defining challenge for Africa in the 21st century. By integrating economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability, African nations must forge a new model of progress – one that is needed for the continent, and around the world. (p.18)

The notable point in the statement is that African nations must find ways to realise sustainable development. Religion is a powerful tool in Africa that can enhance the transformation of people's lives (Etzelmuller 2017:107; Nanthambwe & Magezi 2022:2). According to the above statement, we emphasise that religion in Africa is the ground through which the lives of Africans, including those with disabilities can be transformed.

The correlation between religion and development has garnered growing attention in scholarly research (Adedibu 2020:136; Bompani 2012:307–330; Jones & Petersen 2011; Schnable 2016:216–232). Before the emergence of holistic development theories that underscored human capacity and moral practice, research in development studies was predominantly motivated by economic objectives that were grounded in an economic conception of development. The prevailing perspective has transformed in light of the emergence of theories that scrutinise the impact of religious actors, concepts, and practices on human economic activity and social transformation (Nussbaum 2011; Offutt et al. 2016; Sen 1999).

According to Offutt et al. (2016:211), there are three potential avenues for social scientific inquiry at the junctures of religion and international development. These include the correlation between religious affiliation, beliefs, and economic growth;

the application of organisational theory to non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and the examination of the relationship between poverty, culture, and religion. Offutt et al. (2016:11) assert that the significance of these three concerns lies in their ability to showcase the distinctive potential of social science in broadening our comprehension of the correlation between religion and development, both in theory and practice.

Religion, spirituality, and faith have been persistently overlooked or avoided in the realm of development theory, policy, and practice for several decades, as noted by Lunn (2009:937) and Adogame (2016:1). Religion was not commonly discussed in public discourse regarding development due to the assumption that it was a private matter of belief, and therefore potentially impeding or obstructing progress (Ver Beek 2000). The interdependence of religion and development studies has been widely acknowledged until recent times, as stated by Jones and Petersen (2011:1292). Kurt Alan Ver Beek, a sociologist, asserted in the year 2000 that religion was a subject that was considered taboo in the realm of development. Ver Beek (2000) conducted a content analysis of three prominent development journals, namely *World Development*, *Journal of Development Studies*, and *Journal of Developing Areas*, spanning 1982–1998. The study revealed a dearth of references to spirituality and religion, with only a few instances where religion was used as a descriptive category rather than being examined for development.

The response that Jones and Petersen (2011) give as to the absence of religion from development studies explained that:

The narratives of modernisation and secularisation that shaped the social sciences for most of the post-war period saw religion as a conservative and traditional force, destined to withdraw and eventually disappear from public life as part of societal progress towards an increasingly modern society. (p.1292)

As per Lunn's (2009:940) assertion, the modernisation ideology prioritised economic growth and development and placed considerable emphasis on contemporary rational principles while regarding traditional worldviews and beliefs as outdated. The emergence of modernisation within societies has led to a decline in the societal significance attributed to religious institutions, practices, and awareness. The perceived challenge of reconciling religion with the rationalisation of bureaucratic processes and economic progress has been discussed among individuals. However, the narrative has undergone a recent development as of the present day. The correlation between religion and development has gained significant attention in contemporary times, with religion being a prominent subject of discussion among major funding organisations and non-governmental entities. According to Jones and Petersen (2011:1292), there has been a recent increase in the number of research endeavours of religion and development, as well as a rise in the number of conferences, seminars, articles, papers, and books that address this topic. The World Faiths Development Dialogue, spearheaded by James Wolfensohn of the World Bank, serves as a platform for scholarly and global

development policies to deliberate on the appropriate involvement of religion (Schnable 2016:217; World Bank 2007:5).

Carroll's (1992) research on intermediaries, specifically Member Support Organisations and Grassroots Support Organisations, has contributed to recognising the potential roles that religious bodies or groups may have in sustainable development. Conversely, global development remains distinctly attached to a modernist and secular framework. The social and political sciences have largely moved away from the confident modernism of the mid-20th century. However, the development of the MDGs and, more recently, the SDGs demonstrate a persistent dedication to a potential 'grand narrative' that unites global actors towards a shared objective (Ager & Ager 2016). The prevailing discourse on development maintains a fundamental allegiance to modernity regarding its epistemology, while political, social, and cultural thought grapples with the implications of its decline. The concept of scholarship has posed a challenge to established ideas of secularism, both about the frameworks, strategies, and mechanisms that establish the secular state and, more broadly, to the belief that economic and social progress inevitably leads to a decrease in religious involvement (Ager & Ager 2016:102). While the recognition of the role of religion in sustainable development is undeniable, this article argues specifically for Christianity as the avenue through which SDGs can be realised among Africans.

In contemporary times, practical theology has significantly transformed its scope of concern. It has expanded beyond its traditional focus on ecclesiastical practice and the clergy to encompass broader societal issues that individuals encounter in their communities. This development is supported by substantial evidence, as noted by scholars such as Chester (2013:39–41), De Wet (2017:259), and Magezi (2019:133, 2020:62). This significant development signifies that practical theology in Africa should involve discussing the way that people with disabilities on the continent can be served. This kind of service should exclude just having good agendas and policies for disabilities, as observed by Chataika (2019), but should also be practically involved in transforming their lives.

According to this perspective, practical theology assumes a distinct public dimension when it is transformed into public practical theology. Kim (2017:40) highlighted that public theology is characterised by a critical, reflective, and reasoned approach to engaging theology in society to advance the kingdom of God, particularly for the benefit of the poor and marginalised.

The conception of public theology as such involves the incorporation of training individuals to serve their communities within the realm of practical theology. As stated by Magezi (2020:62), the concept of individualism is contradicted by the inherent nature of theology. Osmer and Schweitzer (2003:215) rightly asserted that it is crucial

for practical theology to incorporate the public dimension in its endeavours and not overlook its significance. Juma (2015:1) and Dreyer (2004:919) argue that the objective of theological education should not be limited to the church, but rather to prepare individuals for service in the broader society.

The discourse presented by Magezi (2023) pertains to the praxis of practical theology in the context of South Africa and Africa. Magezi (2023:5) recognises various contextual realities in which practical theology can be applied. He outlines the following contexts: African theology, African religion, understanding of the multiple publics and audiences for targeting, practical theology church focus, the existence of majority Christians, decolonisation and post-colonial realities, public theology, and contemporary African reflection gaps.

Magezi (2023:6, 7) expounded on the concept of practical theology in Africa, highlighting that it pertains to the practical application of Christian theology in Africa. It is imperative that scholarly engagements and reflections consider this reality. In sub-Saharan Africa, Christianity and its affiliated institutions represent the largest religious group, with most of the population identifying as adherents of this faith. Asamaoh-Gyadu (2020:37) affirms this by saying that 'Christianity has now developed as a non-western enterprise with Africa as one of its major heartlands'.

Dreyer (2012) and Nwachuku (2012) assert that practical theology in African nations centres on the Christian faith, in contrast to the more comprehensive and expansive concept of lived religion observed in other regions, such as Europe. Magezi (2023) proposes the following assertion due to this fact:

Therefore, if practical theology is to address the needs of its African context, then it should have a Christian thrust more than a general religious focus. Practical theology has to equip leaders to critically engage their context to yield the desired positive change. Practical theology focus should include equipping churches to develop public pastoral care strategies to help church communities engage in societal changes. (pp. 6,7)

One of the societal changes that is needed in Africa is the inclusion of disabled people in development efforts. How can practical theology help in this regard? Lartey (2013) and Agang (2020) concluded that the objective of practical theology is to enhance the ability of churches to make meaningful contributions to society. In the context of religion and development, Asamaoh-Gyadu (2020:37) pointed out that religion, including those with eschatological solid orientations, is generally expected to lead to some measure of development in human life and society. Religious practices that hinder social progress should be regarded as detrimental to the advancement and growth of humanity.

According to Magezi (2020:61), churches must engage with significant public issues and matters about society. Churches possess a public dimension as they are designated and dispatched as agents of change within society. Religious organisations significantly influence public life by their dedication to the betterment of society. This phenomenon occurs not only through the verbal and behavioural actions of individuals within the church but also via their engagement in activities beyond the physical boundaries of the institution. It is in this context that disabled people can be reached in Africa.

Magezi (2018:3) identified three challenges that must be addressed in Africa to adapt practical theology to the African context. Firstly, the obstacle lies in formulating a theological framework that promotes the betterment of human existence. Secondly, there is a challenge to effectively engage and reconstruct societal structures to improve the quality of life for individuals. Thirdly, a necessity exists for pastoral care to be regarded as a form of human care that ought to be executed within the public sphere as an exemplar of practical theology. These challenges present a formidable undertaking for religious institutions to carry out their ministerial endeavours to effect positive change in individuals' lives. For instance, challenge number two calls for the abandonment of all approaches that do not yield results in transforming people's lives for the better. In this matter, African religions, specifically Christianity practised in Africa, can help achieve the SDGs, as it encourages the betterment of not just an individual but the whole community.

What does an African church need to do to ensure that disabled people are not left behind?

The article appropriately culminates by suggesting pragmatic measures that the African church can adopt to guarantee services to individuals with disabilities across the continent.

Firstly, churches must establish a form of public pastoral care that guarantees the fulfilment of individuals' requirements. This encompasses catering to the requirements of individuals with disabilities. Several studies have demonstrated that individuals with disabilities encounter rejection, marginalisation, and alienation from church ministries (Shodipo 2023; Swinton 2012). However, African churches can potentially leverage the concept of *ubuntu*, which is deeply ingrained in African religion, to relinquish religious practices that reflect colonial and individualistic perspectives. The concept of *ubuntu* in African religions promotes a communal outlook on life rather than an individualistic one. The act of communal living and mutual support fosters a sense of unity within society, whereby individuals can share their burdens and alleviate their anxieties through the collective efforts of a community of believers, also known as *kononia*. The concept of being Being-for-others is a means of situating the individual in a state of possessing equivalent ontological status with the broader society (Magezi & Kholopa 2021:23). *Ubuntu* offers a promising framework for pastoral caregiving by emphasising

its practical and experiential nature, rather than treating it as a purely theoretical pursuit. The African cultural context and worldview foster a mindset that promotes constructive and high-quality interpersonal relationships and a positive attitude towards individuals with whom one shares a common identity. An excellent example of a demonstration of *ubuntu* within a religious context is what Ajibade (2020) presented in the setting of African Pentecost Churches in Nigeria. Ajibade (2020) narrated:

In many Pentecostal Churches where there exists a social network, whenever any member is in a terrible social and economic mess, his/her Pentecostal group becomes his/her succour. They will not only give financial assistance to the person but will also organise intercessory prayers to support the family. This is a way of showing that when the political authority fails in any given state like that of Nigeria, the Pentecostal groups identify with their group members. Christian ethics also go a long way in helping Christians to cultivate sustainable lifestyles. (p. 160)

Secondly, the church in Africa must not just be a caring church but also a speaking church. The research conducted by Nanthambwe (2010) in the context of poverty in Malawi shows that most churches in Africa are passive when it comes to speaking against ills that promote people's suffering. The multifaceted issues of inadequate governance, gender-based violence, xenophobic attacks, corruption, racial discrimination, poverty, inequality, and joblessness necessitate the involvement of churches in advocating for ethical behaviour and promoting positive change. The churches are expected to act as a moral compass and raise awareness about these challenges. This involves promoting and supporting the rights of individuals who have disabilities. According to Magezi (2020:72), pastors and congregations have a responsibility to fulfil to address the challenges at hand. Pereira (2010) contends that the church has a crucial role as a prophetic voice in contexts where articulating social justice, social obligations, and social reconstruction is necessary for developing African communities. Consequently, there exists a pressing need for individuals to vocalise their opposition to various manifestations of subjugation, abuse, and inequity. To facilitate advancement in Africa, it will be imperative for religious institutions and their leaders to promote democratic principles and serve as advocates for ethical conduct and accountability. The magnitude of corruption and its detrimental impact, particularly on individuals residing in impoverished regions of sub-Saharan Africa, warrants consideration. To abstain from commenting on these issues is tantamount to negating the actuality of the impact that the dissemination of Jesus' gospel has had on diverse communities. The primary focus of the Christian gospel centres around the concept of emancipation from any hindrance that impedes an individual's progress in life. This encompasses not only the freedom of spiritual expression but also the freedom of social and physical autonomy. When people with disabilities in Africa are being rejected, marginalised, and alienated, the church must rise and speak on their behalf. The ecclesiastical institution and its clergymen possess the capacity to serve as formidable advocates of said liberties.

Finally, it is imperative that the church not only exhibits compassion and effective communication, but also fosters an environment of inclusivity. As per the 2019 report released by the UN, the number of disabled individuals in Africa exceeds 80 million, encompassing those with mental health conditions, birth defects, and physical impairments (Toesland 2019). According to the source, individuals with disabilities can be observed soliciting charitable donations in prominent African urban centres such as Accra, Lagos, and Lusaka. Remarkably, it is uncommon to find a clergy member amid the congregants during Sunday church services. The inquiry pertains to the reasons behind the exclusion of disabled individuals in Africa from participating in church congregations. Razaka's (2011) account details the experience of a disabled woman in Madagascar who harboured negative feelings towards the church because of perceived rejection and resentment from members of both the educational and religious communities. The solution to this issue may be found within the narrative. The individual in question, since her early years, experienced persistent feelings of exclusion and animosity and was subjected to ridicule by members of her religious community due to her gender and physical impairment (Razaka 2011:335). This occurrence highlights the persistence of stereotypes towards individuals with disabilities within African churches. For a transformation to occur, African churches must cultivate an environment of inclusivity, where individuals of all physical attributes and societal standings are received with open arms. Churches must exhibit the deity they profess by establishing an inclusive and hospitable environment. According to the gospel, the incarnation of God as a human being was intended to facilitate our acceptance by him, as evidenced by passages such as Philippians 2 and Romans 15:7. What strategies can the church implement to ensure a welcoming environment for individuals with disabilities? Peter (2011) presents the following arguments.

Firstly, the church must redefine human society as a unified family comprising individuals of all genders and ages with varying abilities and disabilities.

Secondly, we must discard our preconceived notions about beauty, ugliness, perfection, wholeness, normality, ability, and disability that we have internalised over time.

Thirdly, it is imperative to renew the curriculum in all theological faculties to ensure that the theology of disability is not marginalised as a 'theology of disabled, for the disabled, and by the disabled'. It is recommended that the theme of disability be incorporated into mainstream curricula about theology, ethics, philosophy, and biblical exegesis.

Finally, it is imperative to recognise that unrestricted physical access to all locations is not a mere 'special need' of a select few but a fundamental requirement for all individuals. Hence, the needs of persons with disabilities (PWDs) must be considered during the construction of religious institutions, educational facilities, and other public spaces. It may be

advisable to involve them in community development and architectural advisory processes. The integration of recreational activities such as ramps and lifts, improvement of lighting and acoustics in architectural structures, and the facilitation of sign language interpretation, Braille amenities, and assistance services for PWDs should not be considered solely superficial enhancements. It is incumbent upon us to fulfil our ethical obligation. As a collective, we possess varying degrees of ability and disability, yet we can provide mutual aid and support to each other.

Conclusion

The article has provided a discourse on the potential contribution of religion, specifically Christianity, towards the attainment of SDGs that are related to the integration of PWDs. The article has presented evidence to support the notion that the implementation of the 'leave no one behind' principle, which is integral to achieving the SDGs, has not been successful in ensuring that individuals with disabilities can fully access the benefits of the SDGs. This article has suggested the adoption of practical theology by the church as a feasible strategy to interact with the disabled community in Africa efficiently. The article has advocated for implementing pertinent pastoral care within churches to facilitate the inclusion of PWDs, thereby promoting the achievement of the SDGs that prioritise the principle of leaving no one behind.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

P.N. and V.N. contributed equally to this work.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

The research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of

any affiliated institution, funder, or agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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