

ROLES OF CHURCH LEADERS IN ECONOMIC STABILITY IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

It is an undisputed fact that Nigeria is a wonderful nation blessed with diverse natural resources. Yet the country is still looming in economic instability. Over the years, leadership has been observed to be a major factor contributing to the underdevelopment and gross mismanagement of resources. Thus, it is no news in the Nigerian society that there has been a downward slope in the growth of Nigerian economy. This paper took a keen examination on the economic condition of Nigeria with the intention of driving towards viable framework that can generate stability. This paper employed a descriptive research methodology and its periscope was within the purview of how religion and religious leaders can help the economic situation of the country. There are diverse religious beliefs in Nigeria, but this paper focussed on Christian religious leaders. In Africa, Nigeria is known to have a very large growing population of Christian religious adherents. Also, the fact that the church is filled with people and families that constitute significant part of the Nigeria society sets platform for the relevance of the Church leaders as it concerns economic stability of Nigeria. This article therefore explored the significant impact and roles of church leaders in driving the Nigerian society towards economic stability, thereby seeing church leadership as a catalyst for economic stability. The paper recommended that leaders of the church are to be active in orientation of the duty of citizens to their country and to encourage members to be actively involved in managing available resources around them.

Keywords: Christian Leaders, Economic Stability, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria is a complex and interesting country. In several ways, it is a country that can be described in paradoxical superlatives, a country so blessed with overflowing wealth, yet, riddled with overwhelming poverty. A nation that produces millions of barrels of crude oil but yet its citizens keep vigils at fuel stations, a country that boasts of the richest man on the continent but still is the poverty capital of the world (Forbes, 2018). Nigeria is also home to over two hundred million (200,000,000) people of diverse cultures and languages. Nigeria as a country is unarguably the most populous black nation on earth. It does not only stay as the most populous black country, it is also the seventh largest country in the world. Nigeria is also quite arguable one of Africa's largest economy today, with an estimated gross domestic product (GDP) of \$477.38 billion, constituting a huge percent of West Africa's GDP and of the continent's GDP as a whole (Gren, 2023).

According to World Bank (2020), Nigeria is a key economic player in West Africa. She accounts for about half of West Africa's population with approximately 202 million people and one of the largest populations of youth in the world. In many ways, Nigeria can be described as a nation with great potential for economic sustainability based on this reality. It is richly endowed with a vast array of natural resources and human capital. It is factual to say that the mainstay of the Nigerian economy today is oil. This is one of the reasons many people see Nigeria as the "Giant of Africa". Even with lots of socio-political and economic issues facing the country, it is highly respected among other African countries and other continents.

In spite of the enormous natural and human resources, many Nigerians today still wallow in abject poverty, diseases, infant mortality, illiteracy, marginality and abysmal quantity type of income. In the federal and state levels, the kinds of income average Nigerians get leads to desperate competition for the crumbs that fall from the tables of the political divides of Nigeria. Unfortunately today, the minimum wage of civil servant is not enough to take care of their family for a month. And so, given the huge upside economic potentials of Nigeria, questions necessarily arise on how this status quo does not tally with the economic prowess of the nation. Also, why has the country continued to underperform economically both locally and globally, even with the availability of the nation's resources? The vast challenge is discovered in the course of this paper to be issues hovering around leadership, where there is no proper utilisation of the available resources and personnel.

The issue of economic development and sustenance is of national concern. The Nigerian economy had a truncated history from independence to present times and the economy has suffered series of economic instability because of a long period of unsustainable growth in the per capital real income of the country, accompanied by lack of fundamental changes in the structure of the economy. This paper then observed the religious sector as a prominent sector of the country that is a good ground to start with. This proposition is on the premise that Nigeria is a religious country. Religion is a very important aspect of human existence. Every human being has one religion or another, because arguably man is a religious being, which implies that everyone has a belief system or the other. (Asadu, 2021). There are three major religions in this country: Islam, Christianity and African religions. However, the periscope of this research is the Christian religion. More so, this discourse is channelled towards the path of exploring the role Christianity (with specific attention on the church leaders) in helping Nigeria overcome her economic challenges, as such becoming economically stable.

The State of Nigerian Economy

Due to the large size of the country and economy, it occupies a prominent position in West Africa, in Africa and in the World today. Prior to the discovery of oil in Nigeria, agriculture was the cornerstone of the nation's economy. Achievements of the period included the development of the value chains of commodities like cotton, rice and export crops like cocoa, palm oil and groundnut. Although, the agricultural sector still remains a great source of revenue for the Nigerian economy, accounting for about 30 percent of the GDP, attention has shifted to oil and natural gas (Arinze, 1982). The oil sector can be divided into two sub-sectors: the upstream production of crude oil or natural gas (mostly for export) and the downstream activities, e.g., refineries and petrochemicals. The main pillar of the Nigerian economy is the upstream sector.

With a maximum crude oil production capacity of 1.4 million barrels per day, Nigeria is Africa's largest producer of oil and the fifteenth largest in the world as at January 2024 (CEIC, 2024).

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2023), about 60 percent of the national budget was devoted to debt servicing. Inflation rate increased from 22.41% to 22.79 percent in May 2023 before the year came to a close. Poverty has become wide spread with about 75 percent of the people living in abject poverty. And according to Ottuh & Eboh (2021), the poverty rate in the Northern part of the country may be as high as 85 percent. From the foregoing, it is evident that Nigeria is facing enormous hindrances on her path to economic development and there is need for her to explore all avenues to overcome these challenges. The recent increase in Nigerians poverty rate is a result of several economic downturn people are faced with in the nation. This stems from the removal of fuel subsidy and several taxes put in place by the federal government. The economic hardship in the country is heightened beyond the way it was in recent past.

The country is blessed with many natural resources that largely remain untapped (Emmanuel & Gladys, 2021). It is so unfortunate, that Nigeria is a developing country with a plethora of socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, insecurity, corruption, poor infrastructure and general underdevelopment, however, it is a nation with great potential for economic sustainability. As always, the road from potentiality to actuality is often paved with varying degrees, depths and forms of roadblocks. Therefore, although Nigeria is a rich country, its peoples are poor as its resources remain largely untapped, wasted and misappropriated.

Challenges Facing the Nigerian Economy at Present

There are lots of challenges facing the Nigeria economy in the contemporary time. These issues are happening across all sectors of the Nigerian society, but their effects are negatively felt on the economic stability of the country though. This paper sees the need to itemize the challenges here: among all, corruption is one of the main factors affecting the economy of the nation today. Very recently, between November 2022 and March 2023, the nation went in to a state of misnomer in all sectors because of the abysmal policies of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) as it concerns the policy of redesign of the Naira, one thousand, five hundred and two hundred naira notes. A lot of businesses faced different casualties due to the scarcity of Naira. Citizens were plagued to the state of using Naira to by Naira. Lots of Small and Medium Enterprises could not survive the heat created by an unprecedented policy which gave no room for Nigerians to breathe. Lots of casualties happened to many banks during this process.

The Vanguard News reported that, huge amount of money were said to be used in the process of actualizing the Naira redesign by the CBN Governor (Mr. Emefiele). Evidently, after the administration of President Buhari in May 2023, Emefiele was arrested by the Department of State Security (DSS) for investigation in June 2023. In the same vein, Tinunbu ordered the arrest of Bawa, the EFCC Boss (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission) (Vanguard News, June 2023). These recent scenarios of allegations and arrests are on the basis of corruption and embezzlement. These examples are a serious one at the top level of government in Nigeria. The negative impact of corruption on the Nigerian state is enormous. It is therefore not out of place to say that trillions of naira has been stolen through failed contracts, diversion of public funds and

crude oil theft among others. These activities are on a daily basis denying the country the much needed funds to execute developmental projects.

Furthermore, the level of insecurity in Nigeria has become very high. The insurgences of terrorist groups in Northern Nigeria and the spate of armed robbery as well kidnapping in southern Nigeria have made the country unattractive to investors within and without Nigeria. The story of kidnapping and killings has become a norm in the faces of national dailies. Many Nigerians lose their hard earned money to people, thieves and have nothing to bank on for livelihood. A lot of people now live from hand to mouth because they have used all they have to pay ransom to the people who held their loved ones hostage. Also, many people could no longer access the regions where they have their enterprises because of loss of lives and properties.

It is also important to mention that Nigeria is one of the African countries with high level of employment. The level of unemployment in Nigeria is alarming. And it seems this challenge has defied government solution or perhaps the government is not doing enough to create jobs for the teeming unemployed youths. One of the reasons common to many Nigerian youth for engaging in illegal dealings is the fact that there are no jobs available in the country. Although the fact remains that this is not a legitimate reason to behave unlawful or engage in illegal activities, but then, the truth is that there is no employment or job opportunities for people in this country. Even those who have jobs are not adequately catered for by both the state and federal governments, only the political office holder's remuneration is robust in the country.

The recent improvement in the supply of power in Nigeria is still far from meeting the power requirement of the Nigerian economy. There is need for the government to reform the power sector without further delay. While increasing the electricity tariff will help stabilize power supply as claimed by the power holding companies, it will increase the economic hardship and struggles of Nigerians. In addition, the mono-cultural nature of the Nigerian economy has limited the economic progress of this country. There is urgent need for the diversification of the Nigerian economy in practical terms.

To mention a few is the deplorable state of infrastructure in Nigeria which has posed a serious challenge to the economy. Most federal and state roads in the country are in bad state. Facilities like water supply, health care, among others are inadequate and they contribute to the instability of economy. Alarm has been raised about Nigeria's gradual decent into debt of recent. The government has been amassing domestic and foreign debts thereby increasing the debt burden. This is and will still retard Nigeria's economic progress in future especially when the time comes to service the debts or repay the loans. According to Punch Newspaper (19th January, 2023), Federal Government of Nigeria owes China, Japan, Germany, two others \$4.85bn. Although some of these borrowed resources are amerced on the basis of infrastructure and several other projects, like transportation; the status of Nigeria basic facilities by the people remains unchanged.

On this note, this paper posits that a call for the restructuring and repositioning of the economy of this nation is somewhat a call for the nation's overhauling. This is plausible and can be achieved with a step at a time.

The Relevance of Church Leaders to Nigerian Economy

Christianity is one of the largest religions in the world. It is a religious movement entrenched on the life and teaching of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to regulate human behavior in this life with much emphasis on life after death. Besides, Christianity is an agent of transformation. A critical study of Christianity shows that its influential powers are quite irresistible (Asadu, 2015). It has not penetrated any human society or institution without making a remarkable impact. It would not be exaggeration to say that without the close collaboration of Church and Government in the past, Nigeria would have charted a different course of development and maybe would have had a slower rate of development (Asadu, 2021). Christianity through different religious groups has played a crucial role in the national development of Nigeria. Ever before the conception of Nigeria, Christian missionaries had established their mission in some of the areas that were later amalgamated to become one Nigeria and this mission of the church introduced many mission schools which were later handled by the government (Ajayi, 1965).

More so, the advancing frontiers of Christian missionary enterprise created situations of new opportunities, both for the individuals and for the nation. According to Jong (2008), Christian religion and religious activities can influence society in two ways. First, religious activities, such as church attendance, are social activities and thus comparable to meetings of football clubs, tennis clubs, scouts, political parties, etc. These meetings can be instruments for establishing networks that could be of use for economic activities in the region and could also be helpful for establishing trading relations with partners from other countries who belong to the same religious group (Asadu, 2021). This implies that when worshippers come together to practice their religious activities they could also use the opportunity to engage in productive business activities that could advance the economic and development aspirations of a country.

Most churches employ at least one person and many have upwards of twenty employees, especially if they operate a childcare facility or school. Days are gone when the issue of economic stability lies only within the purview of the government and other private sectors, even individuals. The Christian church is actively affected by the situation of Nigeria economy where poverty, inflation, unemployment and economic instability, among others are the order of the day and have greater role or influence on the country's rate of economic progress. Many institutions of learning and hospitals were built by Christian missionaries. Christianity has come under serious criticisms by those who are ignorant of its activities and great contributions in nation building (Kolawole, 2019). All emphasis has been on the failure of the church: that the Church has totally lost focus and has become materialistic (Kolawole, 2022). To this effect, Agha (2004) expressed his concern over this issue when he explained that it is surprising that people have constantly but erroneously underestimated the contributions made by Christian missionary work in Nigeria in the development of the nation'. This perception has also been continuously sustained by many Nigerians concerning the contemporary Nigerian church and church leaders. Nevertheless, this paper posits that religion can be used as a veritable tool for the repositioning of the Nigerian economy through the following means.

Christian religion influences society by the values that are taught by the adherents or most important leaders of the religion concerned. It is assumed that these values will influence actual behaviour and thus the functioning of society (Akin-John, 2010). A deliberate sermonization of values that make for economic progress will not only enhance the growth of the economy but it

will also advance the socio-economic well-being of the people. There is no gainsaying the fact that Christianity has the capacity to instill in its converts strong moral values, regard for human life and integrity through religious education. Christian leaders are also active in fostering the rule of law, equity and the overall well-being of the people which is to help a country achieve economic development and sustainability (Asadu, 2021).

Enough of prosperity preaching (Ayantayo, 2010), the focus of the message of the Church leaders in Nigeria should be geared towards moral and spiritual regeneration. In other words, the Christian message must focus on the upright moral and spiritual development of human person. This is because corruption is a demonic bondage from which people need redemption and deliverance (Nihilola, 2013). In this wise, Church will not only be a thermometer, but also a thermostat for the Nigerian society through truthful messages which uphold genuine and core human values and virtues. And as such, church leaders will be sure to produce responsible Christians who can be trusted to enhance economic growth and development when positioned to serve in several places in the country. Church leaders must provide moral and economic impetus; this is part of the purpose of the church to inculcate morals. If morality will be imbibed by the citizens, it will go a long way to curtailing social vices associated with erring economy like bribery, embezzlement and corruption (Kolawole, 2020). There will be judicious spending of organizations' money and other vices like kidnapping and tensions under which smooth economy cannot germinate will stop or be minimized (Anozie, 2013).

Corruption has been identified as one of the major problems bedevilling the Nigerian economy. Billions of Naira that could have been used to reposition the Nigerian economy have been embezzled or misappropriated by politicians and their collaborators. It is regrettable to note that some of the perpetrators of corruption in Nigeria are arguably active adherents of Christianity, belonging to one denomination or the other (Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu, 2016). The onus therefore is on church leaders to use their influence to preach against corrupt practices and public office holders. It is also part of their roles not allow themselves to become willing collaborators in the plundering of national resources. Therefore, church leaders should distant themselves from corrupt politicians in order for them not to be compromised.

The bible says that "righteousness exalts a nation and sin is an approach to any people" (Prov. 14:34). Some of these challenges can be traced to sinfulness. Thus, church leaders should not be concerned about worldly possessions rather than the preaching of righteousness. To stabilize the Nigerian economy therefore, church leaders in Nigeria must as a matter of necessity, begin to lay emphasis on righteousness and the fear of God. Also, church leaders must not neglect the role of prayer for the transformation of people whose hearts have been enslaved in wickedness and evil acts (2nd Cor 5:17). Although this role sounds passive; its nature is potent in the sense that it is a powerful weapon in the hand of the Church to pull down evil-strongholds erected for sustaining the altar of corruption in the economic space of the Nigerian society. The bible enjoins Christians to pray for the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem (Ps. 122:6). In this instance, Nigeria is the Christian's Jerusalem. Therefore, prayer occupies an important position in the schemes of church leaders in repositioning the economic life of this nation.

Also, church leaders need to concentrate on the business of creating economic institutions. The church has to find itself in a situation where it is the best, continuing as an organized entity in the local community for the acquisition and development of land, building enterprises and the employment of people (Ogundu, 2021). It is obvious that church-based business enterprises help rebuild a community's social infrastructure and provide much needed value-based services as childcare, youth development, elder care and substance counselling. These activities tend to lead to improved schools, better public safety and an enhanced quality of life. The inculcation of moral values in all and sundry will go a long way in creating a platform that will engender increase productivity of Nigerians thereby contributing to economic stability. National values such as honesty, integrity, patriotism are biblical and these should be espoused and preached by church leaders. Emphasis on the need for their members to imbibe the national values, it will go a long way in creating a favourable environment for economic prosperity (Ogundu, 2021).

The comatose state of the Nigerian economy can be attributed to inept leadership in a way. Nigeria has had the misfortune of having leaders that are selfish and greedy. Successive leaders in Nigeria seemed to have been more concerned about the enrichment of self at the detriment of the populace. Thus, church leaders have the responsibility of revealing what true leadership means. Firstly, by teaching the concept of leadership from the bible; and secondly, by demonstrating what leadership and service means to the people. This is suggestive of the fact that church leaders must live an exemplary life to the church members who in turn find themselves in the public space of positions in the society. Christians in Nigeria must come to the biblical understanding that leadership is service and not means to enrich one's self. Contrary to what the society teaches today, the servanthood and selflessness which permeates the concept of service in the bible must be taught by church leaders in Nigeria. Today, most Nigerians live in abject poverty in the midst of abundant human and natural resources. Therefore, church leaders should preach against embezzlement, stealing and then encourage Christians to be selfless in their service to the nation. This will go a long way in ensuring judicious use of national resources in a way that will lead to rapid economic stability, growth and development.

Conclusion

The enormous contributions of Christianity to the economic development cannot be overemphasized. It is evidently clear from the discourse above that the issue of economic diversity requires the church to be actively involved in the process of economic stability in Nigeria. The historical development of Nigeria's socio-economic emergence as it concerns the contribution of the church and church leaders in the areas of education, agriculture, health care and human capital development makes the Christianity a real deal in the country. Thus, this paper posits that the church and her leaders had been at the centre and concern with the privations and problems of the Nigeria contemporary society. Church leaders also play great role in ensuring peace of mind among Nigerians as well as instilling morality.

The stabilization of Nigeria economy must start from the grassroot because the country is bleeding severely. The value the church and church leaders as agents that promotes biblical principles and teachings makes the economic sphere of Nigeria a great space hopeful for positive out-put. True piety means respect and devotion not only to God and parents but also to one's country. This is the kind of preaching and teaching expected from church leaders in the Nigerian society since some of Nigerian political office holders are Christians. The responsibility lies then

on the church leader to dish out biblical truth of honesty, sincerity, patriotism, faithfulness, and service that will make Christians in the public space responsible and accountable. Thus, church leaders should vehemently encourage walking in the ways of their master Jesus Christ. In Nigeria, church leaders must also help quench the fire of ‘get rich quick syndrome’ which has become a norm among Nigerians and is fuelling a lot of illegal deals among youths and adults.

This article recommends that church leaders should come to the realization of their role in the economic stability of the nation. The relevance of the church in Nigeria cannot be denied. Any change or paradigm shift that occurs in the church is indirectly happening over a large number of Nigerians because of the space the church occupies. Therefore, Nigerian church and church leaders should stay on the course of sound biblical teachings which is geared towards making sincere and patriotic Christians who will be good citizens wherever they find themselves. Also, church leaders should lead by example in their respective church denomination and leadership positions which will reflect the correct perception of service to Christians.

Recommendations

Owing to the discourse so far, this paper provides the following recommendation for the church and the government;

The church is to be involved in orientating their members and citizens on the importance of diligence in their responsibility at various sectors. The church leaders are to be vast in knowledge in order to correct excesses or underperformance of an individual. The government should give proper recognition to the church and to interact with the church on means and ideas at managing their resources.

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