

POVERTY, WEALTH AND ECOLOGY VIEWED FROM AFRICAN FEMINIST CHRISTIAN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ETHICS

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Introduction

This essay engages in socio-ethical analyses of the interconnectedness and relatedness of poverty, wealth, ecology, economy and injustices in Africa, particularly South Africa. Poverty and wealth cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-political, ecological, economic, historical and geo-spatial contexts in which they exist and are encountered. They require urgent attention in the articulation of the Christian faith and praxis in our contemporary society as it poses a lot of challenges for many, particularly women. This implies that theological and ethical reflections must be located in the actual lives of African communities and the earth, in order to understand how they deny or enhance the lives of humanity and that of the earth.

Doing theology/ ethics in Africa calls for the utilization of dialogical or multi-dialogical and multi-disciplinary approaches with the social and human sciences in order to illumine and promote a more detailed comprehension of poverty, wealth and ecology. Its benefits include the clarification of issues; the enrichment of the hermeneutical/ interpretative task of ethics, particularly in evaluating the nature and functioning of society, and the ways poverty and wealth are interpreted and lived out. The employ of multi-disciplinary approaches to Christian ethics supports the systematic and detailed comprehension of the functioning of social order and relations, and the decisions, systems and structures which generate oppression of persons, groups, and the web of life, in the economy and ecology. It also relates faith/ theology and ethics to its own cultural and socio-economic and political/ ecological circumstances, and is thus entails a contextually sensitive and explicit appreciation of these concerns.

Doing theology, as African Christian feminist ethicists suggests, encompasses the daily attempts to live our faith and witness to God in the Contemporary world. It also entails the active participation and leadership in the application of diverse God given gifts and talents, and the construction and articulation of theology and ethics when addressing the problems confronting women and men, children, the earth and our communities in Africa (refer to Njoroge 1997: 78, LenkaBula 2006:94). It is thus the commitment to engage in theological and ethical reflections aimed at, and attempting better lives of humanity and the earth informed by African experiences and Christianity.

This paper is structured into four parts. The first part focuses on definitional dimensions of poverty and wealth. The aim of this section is not only to provide definitions, but to also understand the key contextual factors that shape the ways they

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are understood, interpreted and also engaged in theological / ethical discourses and praxis. The second part engages in multi-dialogical and multi-disciplinary and social analyses of wealth, poverty, economy and ecology in order to understand their manifestations in Africa. The third part focuses on the theological and ethical interpretative resources for understanding wealth and poverty, in the light of ethics, scriptures, church traditions and the responses of churches to these concerns. It involves drawing upon the sources of theologies and ethics, as understood by women and men in the church and in society in Africa. The sources of theology and ethics that are tapped into are consistent with the African and Christian understanding that, the humanity and dignity of each person is an inherent and constitutive element of their being (ontology) and therefore, its violation constitutes the dehumanization. Any violation of the dignity of humanity ought to be overcome and changed. It is also shaped by the Christian belief that all people are created in the image of God and hence need to be treated with dignity and respect. As well, Christianity and African wisdom teach us that humanity, the earth and the web of life, are interconnected and that all of creation is good. The essay thus concludes with the identification and affirmation of some of the sources of hope and justice which are relevant for the overcoming of injustices in the economy and the earth.

Definitional Dimensions of Poverty and Wealth

There are numerous conceptions of poverty existent in literature of Africa. Africans do not understand poverty as only a fact of life that is with them. They also understand it as a construed myth that is imposed on communities defined as poor. For instance, Africa and African peoples are defined as poor yet Africa and African communities are endowed with is numerous gifts, talents, biodiversity, knowledge systems, and natural resources. Africa is endowed with immense biological resources. Its topography and vegetations characterised by unsurpassed natural variance, including tropical forests with high degrees of endemism in west and central Africa, the huge savannah belt, diverse and unique flora and fauna in southern Africa, especially the cape, and wilderness and desolation found in the Sahara, Namibia and Kalahari deserts. Not only is there enormous wealth in the biotic life, but also in natural resources, diverse cultures and communities. To limit the characterization of Africa to poverty, or deprivation may risk undermining the presence of the wealth available and present in Africa. It is however important, also to note that despite the availability and presence of diverse biotic and human resources in Africa, it is considered poor by many in the world. These contradictions, that there is tremendous wealth in people and biotic resources', and yet the persistence of poverty, lamented by the South African Catholic Philosopher, Teffo (1999:49) when he says "Africa is a rich continent but is people are poor."

Africa and its people are generally described as poor for a multiplicity of reasons. These may include, ill-health and lack of access to medical care, homelessness, landlessness, being hungry, not meeting the basic human needs and rights, such as the rights to health, shelter, education, water, living with disability, or chronic illnesses, beginning a life at a different place, exiled and or living in communities or societies considered poor. People may also be defined as poor because of misfortune or ill-luck and loss of the means to life, property, food etc such as the result of natural and human disasters (drought, floods, fires, etc) which disable the normal functioning of human societies, Sometimes people are poor because of experiences of

discrimination, lack of education, being orphaned, or lacking family/social support, the uncertainties of employment and self-employment. Sometimes the reasons behind poverty are material deprivation, denial or obstruction of agency to uplift one's life due gender, racial and other forms of injustices.

Any constructive discussion of poverty, wealth, economy and ecology in Southern Africa cannot ignore the role of apartheid in the allocation of resources and wealth of South Africa. Apartheid as an historical fact and an ideology underpinned by white supremacy, apportioned superiority to white people and inferiority to black people in all spheres of life. It permitted white people to annihilate or exploit black people because they were considered to be racially inferior. The legacies of Apartheid and collusion with exploitative aspects of economy have resulted in high levels of inequalities in which others have access to the basic necessities whilst others do not.

The majority of people who were subjected to reservations (Bantustans and townships) at the height of apartheid reign, have today (in post apartheid and democratic period) grapple with under-developed infrastructure and the provision of basic services, including education, health, housing and sanitation. The poorest populations in South Africa are still located in these areas. As a result of the migrant labour system of apartheid, majority of people living in these places, and situations of poverty are women and children, and consequently the faces of poverty in South Africa, constitute largely of women and children.

Poverty is also a result of a range of socio-political and economic factors. South Africa's for example, fairs well among the countries that are well endowed with natural, biotic and human resources. It is also one of the countries in Africa that generally has well developed industries and factories; where productive economic activity is visible or evident. However, with the facilitation and opening of the markets, through market reform and liberalisation, the creative resources of the South Africa, such as farms, mines, fisheries, factories and financial sectors, struggled to compete and resulted in massive retrenchments of people who worked in these sectors. This enhanced the existent inequalities and distribution of life resources between black peoples and white people, but also between men and women.

The adoption of market approach and the rush to open the economy by South African democratic government resulted in the intensification of poverty and unemployment. This situation was also intensified by the high statistics of people affected and living with HIV and AIDS, particularly black South African's who hardest hit by the pandemic were. This especially contributed to deepening levels of poverty as many were not able to afford and access health care and medicines due to their high prices. The second was the absence of income for many people whose resources were generally used in the management of the disease as well as the funeral costs for many.

The manifestations and causes of poverty in South Africa reveal a number of important points: the first is that poverty has numerous dimensions. Rahnema (1995:158-9) proposes four types, namely, a) materialities, b) the perceptions of poor about their own conditions, c), the perceptions of others (those who define others as poor) and d) the socio-cultural spaces, economics, politics and times affecting various perceptions and manifestations of poverty. Materialities concern the conception of

poverty as constituting or describing a lack of something, in other words, deprivation. Definitions of poverty in this dimension either attend to issues such as the lack of income, livelihoods or access to resources and basic rights. The second dimension concerns the views of those who are described as poor. It seeks to understand whether those defined poor understand themselves as such, and whether, based on their own definitions, socio-linguistical and cultural understanding they view themselves as poor.

The third dimension of poverty concerns the ways other people portray and or define others as poor. Rahnema (1995:160-161) claims that “the perceptions of the poor about their conditions are seldom identical with the perceptions of those who define them as poor.” He suggests that the lack of correlation between the perceptions of those defined and who define others as poor generally results in differing constructions of solutions to poverty by these groups. It also leads into solutions that are not contextually relevant, sometimes creating more harmful interventions to poverty than solutions which are desired by those defined as poor.

The fourth dimension of poverty, as stated earlier, includes the situation or context, that is, the socio-cultural and political space-times which influence the notions and or experiences of poverty. This implies that, a person who lives in another context, for example, north America, may have a generally different criteria for determining whether one is poor or not. These may or may not be similar to the ways that, for example, a person in Africa, in a particular community may describe their situation of poverty. These include the political, economic, cultural choices that communities or countries make. This includes economic contexts in which people or communities make in politics, economy and ecology.

Poverty, in this sense, is not limited to deprivation, or inequalities, but also to its meanings and manifestations in concrete and specific communities. It includes other indicators such as access to basic needs and rights, to conditions which make access to these possible, active human and moral agencies in one’s life, security, power, vulnerability, capabilities and peace. This implies that poverty is generally a composite structural condition caused, catalysed by a multiplicity of issues. It may also be enhanced or magnified by the mechanism of social relations in a society or community.

The Cameroonian theologian, Jean Marc Ela(1993:64) sadly acknowledges the persistence of poverty in Africa, stating that “poverty, injustices, drought and famine have become African scourges with pictures of its victims, African children with swollen bellies and skeletal limbs are projected throughout the world by the media” Poverty and injustices have become pervasive and the order of life for many of Africa’s populace / peoples despite the continents rich biotic and natural resources. This situation has created socio-political, economic and socio moral condition that African communities have to grapple with in order to find solutions so that African peoples and the earth do not perish.

Social analyses: factors influencing injustices such in economy and ecology

There are numerous reasons which influence the existence of poverty and injustices in the economy and the earth. These include among others, the belief in the supremacy of the market logic and market economy, especially its hyper form, neo-liberal economy. It also includes the systemic interaction and collusions of systems and processes of oppressions, exploitation and abuses, such as racism, gender injustice and discrimination based on, place of origin, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexuality, disability, and many other ways of exclusions. These also result in the indifferences toward the lives and or experiences of those who are different or poor. Processes of indifference toward the poor and or those living in conditions of economic and ecological injustices include, silence, disregard and inattentions to these experiences, including poverty. They also include the blaming of those who are poor, and or treated unjustly for being instrumental in their own poverty, economic and ecological injustices without coherently finding the multiplicity of reasons which resulted in poverty, economic and ecological injustices.

It is important therefore to engage in social analyses to understand the ways in which the reasons cited above, influence poverty, ecological and economic injustices. Social analysis refers to the systematic attempt to understand the functioning of a social order and the network of relationships and structures of power which informs it. It attempts to understand the ways in which life is organised in society. It also seeks to understand the ways in which institutional and governmental processes, the interactions among individuals and collectives, and the distribution, use and sharing of resources are structured and take place.

Social analyses venture at understanding the ways in which peoples and institutions define and regulate social interactions, resources distribution, sharing and uses, including property, politics, and economics. It seeks to find the ways that these are created, interpreted and or revised. This is because social institutions and the rules that govern them, including economic rules, “are products of human action, they are not unchangeable or beyond human control. They can be sustained, transformed, or abolished, depending on the kind of the impact they have on human [and ecological] life” (Ilesanmi 2004:74). Their evaluation is important in order to offer a comprehensive explanation and interpretation of poverty, economic and ecological injustices as socio-historical realities and as such open to transformation.

Any adequate assessment of poverty, wealth, the economy and injustices in Africa must take account of its historical trajectories and understand its current manifestation in terms of its continuities and discontinuities with the past (Ilesanmi 2004:74). African social scientists and economists in Africa suggest that market and capitalist economy in Africa as well as social relations subsumed under market relations in Africa emerged or coincided with the colonisation of Africa. The economy and politics were therefore primarily based on conquest and the search for private property, natural resources *et cetera* which then, were considered as the major means of production and of maximization of profit or wealth. Not only did the search for wealth and resources lead into acquisition of wealth, it also led to the objectification of the human subjects and the commoditisation of social relations. Africa then became part of this as a territorial satellite for conquest, by European powers and companies.

The second phase of Africa's participation in capitalist market economy, particularly shaped by post-colonial politics and social relations, ended in the 1970s, and the more accelerated form, developed in the 1980s. The catalyst for this phase was the neoliberal economic approach and logic which compelled the restructuring of the economy and production to suit, liberalisation, deregulation of currencies and capital mobility, to name a few examples. It also promoted competition and was generally facilitated both technological advances and neo-liberal economic policies.

The third phase is constitutive of the development of a "global capitalist project of an integrated world market, that is several centuries old, even if this market is one in which the few powerful rich fleece the majority of the poor, in a world characterized by wide differences in development, wealth, resources, and power" (Ilesanmi 2004:75). It is also characterized by the privileged movements of capital, referred to as financial liberalisation as opposed to the privileged and free movements of people. Some of the important issues to address include the issues of inequality between and within nations, not only the disparities in affluence but also the gross asymmetries in political, social, and economic power. Distribution of resources in this sort of economy is also abysmal and grim as evidence by the desperate and abysmal conditions that African poor live in.

Rahnema suggests that global poverty is a fact of life, but can also be a myth. In its imaginary/ mythical sense, it uses criteria that are not relevant to the plight of those it defines as poor. He states that the myth of global poverty, and its official status was primarily invented, formalized and articulated in one of the first reports of the World Bank in 1948 which associated poverty with countries' gross national product. It postulated that countries that less than \$100.00 were considered poor and underdeveloped. This was the first occasion in the history of the world that entire nations and countries were considered poor on the grounds that their overall income was negligible when compared with others, particularly countries of the north.

The construction of global poverty, he argues was based the economisation of life and the forceful integration of countries into the world economy, a notion or practice, which he claims had never been done before. This consequentially led to the introduction of new global measures of determining and defining poverty or affluence. It also became the measure prescribing and articulating the various stages of economic development, and "the latter being proposed as the final answer to poverty" (Rahnema 1995: 161). Poverty was no longer described as a multi-faceted human predicament but a "pathological phenomenon of universal character, particularly acute in the pre-economized societies (Rahnema 1995:161-162). This was a setback in that it promoted the supremacy of market logic, and criteria as ways of evaluating life. It made the economy and market relation to become the normative criteria for shaping social relations and interactions of people amongst themselves, but also with the earth and the resources of life. It resulted in the hegemony of the market over and above other activities in local, regional and international relations.

The subjection of life to economic rules thus led to drastic changes which influences the perceptions of poverty, as well as its interpretation and reconstruction. It also resulted in the promotion or development of the sets of rules created referents for defining and being defined as poor and thus in need of assistance. It is important to

note that the definition of whole countries and peoples as poor had a major and drastic impact on Africa, African communities (peoples) and biotic resources and life and subjected them to mercantile capitalism (Razu 2000:5). It also led to the exploitation of natural resources, humanity and agricultures of colonised countries by European states and state sponsored companies. It facilitated the conversion of the economy into the supply-demand activity, characterized by consumer markets, acquisitive conduct and cultures, monopolization of resources and capital, and market seeking investments and growth.

While traditional answers to poverty were in the past, generally based on pluralistic and sometimes, culturally or religiously established and to a large extent, holistic criteria, they were subsumed to market criteria, especially that of income (for countries and individuals) and economic growth. This one dimensional approach or perspective over-shadowed the utilization a variety of more detailed and sensitive processes and solutions to poverty, including, political, cultural and socio-ecological and economic approaches. It developed into a system that reinforced and validated to the exclusion and marginalisation of many countries and peoples who were considered poor. It also legitimised their position as poor.

The consequences of this were that many people were persuaded or manipulated to believe in the economic myth that poverty can now be overcome through increased productivity and the modern economy's trickle down effects. The modes of life and social organisation based on simplicity and living communally or sharing the commons were and are continuing to be devalued and discredited. The challenge is that the vast increase in the wealth of the countries that were defined as developed or not poor were not interrogated. The socio-historical and political power and might, which were antecedent in the shaping of the wealth of the nations or communities of the north, as well as the excessive acquisition of capital, assets and resources by individuals, higher than whole nations or regions, (for example, the 100 richest people in the world) were not questioned, or significant questions on how they acquired the status of "wealth/ rich/ affluence" were not part of the mainstream social and human sciences or discourses, even sadly, by institutions such as churches. This resulted in the economy becoming an activity largely characterized by acquisitive attitude, greed and sometimes the violation of the dignity of whole communities, peoples and the earth.

The obsession with the economisation of life in many African countries was the result of both internal and external factors. The internal factors included the 'uncritical' adoption of market based economic laws and policies by African leaders' even when they were leading into the pauperization of their peoples, biodiversity and resources and the alienation of the poor and of government from their constituencies. Some of the locally developed economic programmes by African countries were made in order to be seen to conform to international trade/ economic rules. South Africa and other African countries, for example, have designed a programme of action known as the New Partnership for Africa Development which *inter alia*, aims at reducing poverty. The problems with this initiative is that it views along similar lines, the market as the only justifiable process of allocating resources to people, and or the best alternative for dealing with poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth. The subjection of basic human needs and rights to the market through privatisation has meant that majority of Africa's peoples become more helpless and vulnerable. It has also led to

greater social and economic inequalities and polarisation which are also stratified by race and gender relations that are generally skewed, particularly in South Africa. It has also strengthened the inequalities between Africa and countries of the north as costs of trade for Africa have increased.

The adoption of the neo-liberal economic policies was not a fully voluntary process by many African countries. They had been coercively imposed through conditionalities and threats of exclusion from international relations and participation by international financial and multilateral institutions, involved in the international governance of these. Here, examples are the Structural Adjustment programmes (SAPS), Poverty Reduction strategies and the new international rules such as the Agreement of Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights which for instance allows for the ownership and commercialisation of almost all aspects of life, including that of humans, animals and plants.

The indiscriminate opening of the economy under the pressure of international financial institutions, IMF, the WB and to date, the support of World Trade Organisation (WTO) has had devastating effects on the lives of many African countries. The promises of economic success and wellbeing under the neo-liberal market economy, which are advocated by these institutions, have led to cutting down of government functions as well as the provision of the basic necessities and services. They have not led to eradication of poverty, let alone its reduction. They have not, in Africa, led to the economic success that the market economic logic and these institutions proclaim. The compulsive logic and propellant of capitalist accumulation and impoverishment, has continued to validate itself even when it fails the majority of Africans.

The insistence by proponents of the market as an all encompassing value, and accordingly the only way to evaluate the importance or utility of people, commodities, social relations et cetera has resulted in massive pauperization of individuals and whole communities. This is attested to by numerous reports including the Human Development Reports of the United Nations which reveal that most countries in Africa rank in the lower or bottom half of the Human Development Index, meaning that they are amongst the 15 lowest ranking countries. The large scale increases in poverty among the African peoples, subsequent to the imposition of the open market policy threatens the survival of the fabric of society the web of life. Contrary to the declaration of the good that economy, especially neoliberal economy produces for all society, is the fact that this type of economy exposes majority of peoples to risks, unjust conditions of radical inequalities, extreme, persistent and pervasive penury. It has consequently led to the taking and hoarding of African economies, resources and wealth by the powerful multinationals' and financial speculators of the rich countries, who are referred to as "investors".

The economy as it is constructed today, and the manner in which it functions, constitutes "a core injustice, not only because it produces disparate results between the poor and the rich countries, but also because the rules have been from the beginning unequally applied. To some, the rules are never applied because they made the rules, while the rest of the world community must strictly comply if they have to be listened to ...or protected (Ilesanmi 2004:79). Africa is most disadvantaged by economic injustices because it has not been integrated into the global economy using

the terms and conditions, consistent and sensitive to the persistent poverty afflicting its peoples and the earth. This has meant that it will continue in the path of never-ending impoverishment if the situation is not changed.

Are there any reasons which justify the persistence of poverty in Africa and if so what are they and how do they help us in the transformation of poverty and economic injustices to wellbeing. Below I outline some of the philosophical and or justifications cited for poverty and economic injustices.

The Case against Economic and Ecological Justice

It is not adequate to analyse the manifestations of poverty, the economy and ecology, as well as the efforts to overcome their negative implications, it is also important to adequately understand the views of those who do not support the provision of justice for the poor and the earth, as well as their philosophical and or reasoning for their positions. There are numerous articles and books in theology, philosophy and ethics which provide reasons why the poor should not be helped to transform their conditions. These views also promote the idea that there is no need to promote ecological and economic justice. Examples of contemporary arguments against the poor and ecological and economic justice includes, among others, the works of the American scholar and 'environmentalist' Garret Hardin, and the Canadian philosopher based in the department of Philosophy at Waterloo University, Jan Narveson.

Garret Hardin wrote an article in 1974 on the case against the poor outlining the reason why the poor do not require help or economic or ecological justice. Hardin (1974:43)² argued against justice stating the following:

He argued that not all people who live in the earth require having equal rights and equal share to the earth's resources. He suggested that the life-boat metaphor should guide the solutions to economic and ecological issues, stating that people should be taught that common ownership of resources is wrong and thus a tragedy. That we must recommends private property as the only solution to economic and ecological concerns.

Arguing against justice he asserts

The concept of pure justice produces infinite regression to absurdity. Centuries ago, wise men invented statutes of limitations to justify the rejection of such pure justice, in the interest of preventing continual disorder. The law zealously prevents property rights, but only relatively recent property rights. Hardin (1974:43).

He further states that it is of no use to link the injustices of the past associated to wealth creation, but must begin with life boat ethics today, so that posterity prevails. This he expresses in the following words

We are all descendants of thieves, and the world resources are inequitably distributed. But we must begin the journey tomorrow from the point

² Can also be viewed on <http://www.uwmc.uwc.edu/geography/malthus/case.htm>

where we are today. We cannot remake the past. We cannot safely divide the wealth equitably among all peoples so long as people reproduce at different rates. To do so, would guarantee that our grandchildren and every one's grandchildren would have only a ruined world to inhabit (Hardin 1974:43).

Another example of contemporary philosophical support for the rejection of seeking justice in the economy and ecology, and thus primarily for the poor is promoted by Narveson. It is important to cite extensively, some of his views. He begins his article by confessing that he had in the past, believed in helping the needy but does not any longer do so. He has come to the inclination that most people like him, as well as their families, friends and neighbours of us who do not devote a lot of money or thought to issues economic justice and poverty, "are quite justified in not doing so" (Narveson 2004: 305-6). This he says is due to a range of issues, including among others the following, that the poor need not get poorer and poorer; that it is the individual's decision to help or not to help; that egalitarians, who claim that we should act on poverty because every individual has intrinsic dignity, needs and rights, are "irrational and really a potential source of misery for the world's poor in the end" (Narveson 2004:321a). As well, that egalitarians "discriminate against those whose luck is good and those whose luck is bad" (Narveson 2004:325).

Narveson (2004:329) further points out that, it is not necessary to participate in economic and ecological justice, or for the eradication of poverty.

We need not solve poverty because it is not misery ... we should not assume that the very 'poor' in various parts of the world, as measured by real income reckoned in western terms, are thereby miserable. They are, by and large, not so, and likely are no less happy than you or I...that is one main reason why we should not disrupt their ways of life by imposing ours on them (Narveson 2004:329).

He argues that the call for justice, that many African and other Northern philosophers/theologians make which related to the changing of the plight for the better are largely misplaced. This he argues, is because, the affluent, in his interpretation, 'income rich', are in that position because of their hard work, effort and ingenuity, not necessarily because they own or have oil, gold, platinum, diamonds, or natural stuff, but because they have thought intelligently about what to do with them. That poverty is due to native intelligence due to the fact that "some people are significantly brighter than others" (Narveson (2004:401 b). In his view, the poor are thus poor because they are not intelligent.

Narveson (2004:334) asserts that wealth creation also requires exploitation because "all useful exchanges between peoples involve 'exploitation' ...in which each party derives some benefit from the other" As well, he says the claim that countries of the north became wealthy because of the poor is essentially ludicrous, absurd and just wrong. He further justifies the poverty of poor nations by stating that they are poor because of self-imposed reasons, including bad leadership, Kleptocracy, by their governments, and lack of ingenuity and active participation in the market economy, and taking advantage of the law of comparative advantage as postulated by the economist Pareto (Narveson 2004:336-339).

Unfortunately, unlike Hardin who acknowledges some of the historical reasons behind the inequalities between the poor and the rich, Narveson does not at all attempt to link history with economics and politics. One other justification for his position against ecological and economic justices is his view that “environmentalism is a luxury that only the very rich can afford. Again to impose the tastes or even the requirements of the rich on everyone else is arbitrary and harmful” (Narveson 2004:342). This he says can be justified on the grounds that “a pollution that will cause your death when you get to be 80 is not worth paying to clean up at the cost of the money that will only enable you to live to 60 anyway(Narveson 2004:342). Finally, he argues that the differences between the poor and wealthy is a matter of diversity and ought to be encouraged. He claims that it would be irrational to ask a wealthy individual who can afford his jaguar or a trip to Tahiti to persuade him that he should instead be trying to turn the work into a uniform landscape of plain gray houses full of people living on beans and rice. In another article, Narveson (2004:398 b) argues that that it is important for people in the north to understand that generally speaking, the owe “the world’s poor, as a class, anything special.” Secondly, that “the situation of the world’s poor is not an emergency, and there is little reciprocity about it (Narveson (2004:399 b).

Tapping Into Biblical, Church and Ecumenical Resources for Economic and Ecological Justice

It imperative, in the light of historical, socio-political and economic analyses engaged in the above, to ask, what is the message of Christianity about the plight of the poor. Can it or should it accept the injustices that are promoted in the economic and ecological realm? Do Christianity and or Christian ethics bring good news to the poor of Africa in the 21st century? Does its message have a compelling and compassionate stance with and in solidarity with those who are negatively affected by poverty and injustices in the economy and ecology?

Wealth and poverty ought to have ethical point of reference which is relevant in transforming their negative effects for the betterment of the lives of the poor, the economy and the web-of life and its relations. The ethical points of references for African feminist ethics are numerous sources. They include the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, women experiences and those of their communities, rationale, African culture and tradition, and dialogue with other knowledge forms as they provide lessons and resources relevant for the pursuit of justice and wholeness for the people and creations of God.

There are numerous texts in both the New Testament and The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) which attest to the pursuit of justice in the economy and ecology which African feminist Christian ethics can tap into and interact with.³ There are numerous biblical texts which attest to the fact that justice and righteousness are essential to the wellbeing and well-functioning of society. The Hebrew Scriptures do not only concern themselves with justice and righteousness in the fair and just legal or political

³ This does not mean that these texts can just be appropriated literally and applied to the concrete contexts of injustices as the period and contexts of the bible and of contemporary Africa are radically different, although there might be similarities in some ways.

systems, they also address justice in economic relations, and structures of governance, between peoples and their rulers, and in relation to the earth. Justice is thus understood as one of the foundation of human, economic and ecological justice. For instance, prophet Isaiah denounces the economic injustices that prevail in his society, saying “ ah you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!”

The prophet Micah similarly condemns the concentration of wealth and power on a few. He condemns those who “convert fields and seize them; house and take them away and they oppress house holder and house people instead of providing justice.

The prophets had lived in the 8th century monarchic rule. During this time, the monarchies of Israel and Judah had dominated and monopolize land ownership in the hands of a few dominant and powerful elite. Many people had during this period, impoverished due to the loss of their land. Their impoverishment was facilitated by of the oppression of the poor by the wealth and those who were political powerful, the kings. The oppression of the people had taken place through coercion and might, and sometimes through shrewd abuse of royal power, such as the seizure of Naboth’s land by Jezebel in (1 king 21).

Sometimes the concentration of power and the resultant acquisitive monopolization of land, resources and power had taken place because of the existence and application of unjust laws. Isaiah 10:1-2 for example, records some of the injustices embedded in the laws of the land when he says, “Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right.” These injustices denied the meaningful existence of the poor. Injustices in the economy and ecology also ensued when those in positions of socio-political power disobeyed the rules and laws that were aimed at protecting the poor, or abused the judicial systems aimed at ensuring justice for all, refer for example to (Amos 5:10).

The prophets stated that the injustices that prevailed in the economy, such as corruption required to be transformed and justice restored. The transformation and restoration of justice as envisioned by prophet Micah for example, includes the idea that people will enjoy creation and the benefits of the resources that God has given to God’s, people, and without fear (Micah 4.4), thus implying that justice goes hand in hand with peace, with access to the resources that enable the proper functioning of society.

The alteration of injustices to justice for prophet Ezekiel includes among other things, the end of violence and abuse, the evictions of peoples from the land and stopping oppression. For instance, it is written, “God proclaims, Enough, O princess of Israel! Put away violence and oppression, and do what is just and right. Cease your evictions of my people, says the lord” (Ezekiel 45:9). This suggests that, who are given the responsibilities to lead, or govern, such as states, they ought rulers (government) must advance justice. They must also ensure that the conditions for justice are met. This means, those who have lost the resources which facilitate the means to life, such as property, are compensated or helped, in order to restore their humanity. It also refers to the idea that violence against the people of God, meted out in order to acquire wealth is unacceptable, and thus in Christian language, sinful. This is expressed eloquently in Psalm 72:4 which compel rulers/ governments to “defend the cause of

the poor of the people, [and] give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.” (I would say oppression not the oppressor). These, are understood as the motives, for ensuring that justice rolls, and is used to assert and guarantee the dignity and integrity of the poor and of the earth.

Some of the known theologians of the early church, (mostly men), devoted some attention to the intersections of wealth and poverty, and tried to develop normative criteria on how they should be understood or related to by Christians. Motlhabi (2003:23) suggests that Chrysostom discouraged excessive wealth stating that God did not create some people poor and some rich, that God created all people to have access to God’s resources and earth. He was therefore against wealth or private property which derived from injustice, to the extent that he worried that most wealth was generally created through oppression and injustice. For instance, he is claimed to have said “so destructive a passion is greed, that to grow rich without injustice is impossible” (Chrysostom quoted by Motlhabi 2003:23). He stated that it was possible, but quite difficult to obtain wealth without injustice, stating “ we do not forbid the seeking of riches as such, but ill gotten riches, for it is lawful to be rich, but without covetousness, without rapine, without violence and without a bad reputation before all men” (Motlhabi 2003:23-24).

Motlhabi suggests one of the theologians, who was much more consistent with his uncompromising condemnation of wealth, particularly its impact on the poor, Ambrose. He argued that wealth generally generated by taking more than enough of what people need, just to deprive others. For example, he made this comment to clarify his position, “it is the poor who dig for gold, to them the gold is denied and they toil in search for what they cannot keep. He believed that most wealth was gotten through hoarding at the cost of many lives, by those who refuse to share it” (Motlhabi 2003:23-24).

It is clear from the above that “there should be a limit beyond which the accumulation of wealth becomes greed and is no longer ethically and socially acceptable” (Raiser quoted by Taylor 2003: i). Poverty and wealth require active and committed effort to transform the injustices that emerge from social relations, governance, the use and sharing of resources. Below we attempt to explore some of the contemporary sources of justice, or of affirming justice in the economy and ecology.

The churches and the ecumenical movement have in contemporary times sought to develop various interpretative frameworks to understand the intersections between economy, ecology, poverty and injustices. There has not however, been a lot of interrogation of the nature of wealth and its linkages and or effects on the poor and ecology. This is one limitation that ought to be overcome. This is attested to by the following statement,

Even though the biblical tradition is much more explicit about excessive wealth and the ways it can corrupt human community, the Christian churches have been reluctant to address the ethical and spiritual issues related to wealth. In some traditions wealth has been regarded as a sign of divine blessing, often with the imposition that the poor are to blame for their poverty (Raiser quoted by Taylor 2003: i)

The lack of analyses of wealth, especially by international financial institutions and multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary fund, has also been queried by Helen Wangusa. This, she stated especially at the meetings and conversations that took place between the World councils of Churches and these institutions in 2003 and 2004. She asks, “poverty, hunger, epidemics, pandemics’ and mortality rates have reached record levels, but, so too has the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. However, only poverty strategies—not wealth distribution strategies were developed in response” (Wangusa 2004: 55). She questioned whether it was helpful to concentrate effort and attention to poverty reduction and eradication by developing poverty strategies, whilst ignoring the issues of wealth and wealth re-distribution.

This is one of the best and most eloquent responses to the dearth of theological and ethical attention to the question of wealth, yet as we have stated before, and through examples below, biblical resources and attention had not shied away from grappling with wealth and the wealthy, and stipulating the ways they could be transformed for the better of all, including the earth.

The implications of seeking justice, through ethical reflections, social morality and church/ ecumenical praxis, are that African feminist ethicists, in alliance with the church and society, ought to continue pursuing and affirming the imperative for justice for all, and the earth. They also ought to continue being actively involved in the attempts to transform economic and ecological injustices which disregard the concentration and monopolization of the resources of the earth and wealth on a few, whilst simultaneously leaving majority of the poor people to live in squalor, hunger, poverty and injustices. It also has to seek ways in which humanity can overcome the anthropocentric tendencies of abusing the earth, but to affirm the fact that people and the earth, including other creation are inextricably inter-connected. These would act as constitutive elements of encouragement, framework and conditions for building communities of justice where the integrity and dignity of people, in particular those on the underside of economic power are affirmed and protected, but also where justice reigns for all the people of God and the earth. It will also lead to the construction of alliances and communities seeking justice in local and international contexts, so that the notion of caring about one’s neighbour as oneself, including the earth are established.

The call for justice and the obligation to achieve ought to be pursued by all, not just the poor. It is a transnational obligation for all societies, and “a moral corollary of the right to development, for the latter is practically empty if the normative legitimacy of the former is denied” (Ilesanmi 2004:72). This implies that economic and ecological injustices ought to not be based, or only rest on the care, compassion and concern for the victims of economically induced injustices. Justice flows from the understanding that all human beings and the earth have dignity and integrity in them, and thus, anything that undermines this dignity and integrity ought to be addressed. It also calls for corrective or restitutive measures and or interventions when the people of God and the earth are dehumanized and undermined. It requires advocacy for a corrective and envisioning of alternatives to the logic, manifestations and coercion embedded in the neo-liberal economic rules, institutions and market which undermine life and seeks to achieve the fullness of life and the common good for all, and the earth.

Conclusion

The integrity and dignity of human beings which is premised on the notion that all people are created in the image of God, requires us to advocate for justice and to promote the message that the poor and those living in misery and inhuman conditions on the periphery of society be permitted to live their lives meaningfully and to claim voice, space and justice from centre of the society and the economy. It also calls us to acknowledge the interdependence of humanity and the earth (also in contemporary discourses on human rights) tap both religious and secular discourses common or available in daily lives in the formulation of life ethics and praxis that respects the integrity of the earth, and the web of life.

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