POVERTY REDUCTION AS A CHRISTIAN CALL

A VIEW ON MICROFINANCE LOANS FROM PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN ZAMBIA

IRENE BANDA

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Abstract

The impact of microfinance activities in reducing poverty has received mixed reviews. Some studies show positive impact while others show increasing criticism towards practices considered deleterious to poor people's welfare. There are similar opinions amongst Pentecostal churches in Zambia. These churches acknowledge the usefulness of microfinance, but because of negative experiences, they are concerned about its efficacy. The general observation of these churches is that spiritual maturity helps those living in poverty identify the root causes, and are therefore able to plan tangible ways out of poverty. They assert that when people grow spiritually and biblical principles like those in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 are employed, they become more responsible and can use microfinance loans with higher success rates. On the contrary, they observe that poor people who are not grounded spiritually tend to abuse microfinance services by either borrowing more than they need, using loan funds for unintended purposes or generally failing to pay back as agreed. This article presents those views within the context of microfinance provision that responds poor people's needs.[1]

> Even while we were with you, we gave you this command: "Those unwilling to work will not get to eat." Yet we hear that some of you are living idle lives, refusing to work and meddling in other people's business. We command such people and urge them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and work to earn their own living (2 Thessalonians 3:10–12 NLT).

Microfinance and the Poverty Concern

"Name the problem so we can fix it," so the saying goes. Naming the root problems that cause poverty has been the subject of intense debate in the development discourse, without concrete agreement and therefore no sustainable "fix." Attempts at providing welfare support are frowned upon as perpetuating poverty and creating dependency. Furthermore, welfare support is seen as not empowering but rather reducing people's self-determination. Regardless of these views, microfinance is considered an appropriate response to poverty because it recognizes poor people's inherent capacity to help themselves.

To demonstrate the positive impact of microfinance, Daley-Harris tells the story of Saraswathi Krishnan of India. Saraswathi's husband was an unskilled wage laborer who earned very little and squandered it all on alcohol.[2] In desperation, following the increasingly depraved state of their lives, Saraswathi sold her daughter into bonded labor in order to meet some of the bills. Five years later she joined a women's self-help group with a microcredit program. Here she got a loan that enabled her to buy back her daughter and start a small vegetable-selling business. With progressive loans, her economic status improved and so did her family's livelihood.

It is evident that many living in poverty like Saraswathi are already doing micro- and small businesses. However, often they lack access to financial resources to enable them increase business activities and incomes in order to address the poverty conundrum. In response to this need, significant resources have been channeled into microfinance to enable access to credit by more poor people. Between 2004 and 2006, the global stock of foreign capital investment into microfinance, covering both debt and equity, more than tripled to US$4 billion.[3] By the end of 2014, it was estimated that investments in microfinance had gone up from US$8.7 million in 2012 to US$10.4 billion.[4] In the 2004 annual report, the Microcredit Campaign reported that 3,164 microfinance institutions had reached 92 million clients, two thirds of whom were rated the poorest. The report further stated that 66.6 million clients impacted 333 million family members as a result of their improved financial status.[5] This significance was firmly endorsed when the United Nations declared 2005 as the International Year of Microcredit and various events were organized that sought to raise the profile of microfinance.[6] Further, in 2006 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Mohammed Younus who is credited with founding modern-day microfinance. The prize was shared with his Grameen Bank, which is a microfinance institution.[7]

However, despite growth in microfinance, critics questioned its efficacy and raised concerns about whether the problem of lack of financing was indeed at the root of poverty. As Christians have engaged with microfinance from the perspective of responding to Christ's call towards social action, it raises the issue of whether there is a biblical view that redefines the poverty problem. In response, this paper will begin by overviewing microfinance and areas of criticism. The paper will provide an analysis of the views of Pentecostal church leaders in Zambia and discuss the biblical view of poverty. In conclusion, it will propose an approach to developing a different process for engaging with poverty reduction strategies that include but are not limited to microfinance.

What Is Microfinance?

The utility value of money is ubiquitous with everyday living, commerce, and trade. It is at the core of general economic development for individuals, families, and nations alike. For money to fulfill these functions, it must be readily available, affordable, and fungible.[8] The basic financial impulse, therefore, is to save for the future, especially because future needs can be unpredictable. However, the availability of money to individuals is tied to their economic well-being, and this puts poor people at a disadvantage because they often do not have readily available money. Thus, poverty manifests itself in their failure to pay for day-to-day needs and essential life-cycle needs, such as education, childbirth, marriage ceremonies, medical emergencies, deaths of loved ones, war, and natural calamities, such as floods and droughts. Sometimes poor people have opportunities to invest in existing or new business ventures or to buy land or other productive assets: but without money, investing is impossible.

As the purveyors of money, banks generally do not find serving poor people a compelling business case. The amount of money that poor people are able to save is often too insignificant to warrant the time and effort needed for a financial service. Similarly, requests for credit are often so small and support such vague business propositions that banks consider assessing such requests a waste of resources. Moreover, poor people who are in business often lack credible and trackable records to demonstrate positive business trends and financial discipline. They show limited entrepreneurial skills, lack assets to secure loans, and often live from hand to mouth. The fleeting nature of their business ventures reflects these facts. Yet for these business owners, these activities would be their sole source of income. Because of all this, microfinance has become relevant.

Where It All Started

The history of microfinance is as eclectic as its development. Early initiatives started with Irish Loan Funds in Ireland in 1720. Other early funds can be traced to Germany, France, India, the Netherlands, and Sweden. All had humble beginnings in community efforts.[9] The momentum of modern-day microfinance is rooted in development thinking and action aimed at spurring economic growth in mostly Asian, African, and Latin American countries that had been left behind economically following the post-war rebuilding of Europe and America. It was understood that the absence of industrial activities, especially in form of manufacturing, was the reason for low employment opportunities, leading to depressed incomes and poverty. This understanding led to concerted efforts to prototype business development for small-scale enterprises such that in the 1960s and 1970s, small-scale industries accounted for over 50% of manufacturing employment in various developing countries.

Claims of increasing poverty levels demanded surveys, some of which were championed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). One important survey revealed that people living in poverty were already involved in activities that generated income. ILO championed the cause of these activities and in 1972 coined the term "informal sector" to denote the space that was serving the employment needs of small and micro enterprises.[10] The informal sector developed very rapidly. By the 1980s, many of the poorest countries considered the informal sector the right space for development thinking and funding. Micro- and small owner-managed businesses would typically be a woman selling vegetables from her homestead or by the roadside; an individual running an internet café; an artisan producing household furniture; or a small engineering firm dealing in sophisticated gadgets or software. The owners of these microenterprises would typically be more concerned with their own day-to-day survival and therefore mostly classified as poor. However, the identified problem was that these entrepreneurs had minimal or no access to formal credit services to grow their businesses and increase income. In response to this need, the modern day concept of microfinance was born in the 1970s as a poverty reduction strategy.

Mohammed Younus is credited with spurring microfinance activities through his Grameen Bank model. It started in Jobra, a small village in rural Bangladesh. Younus heard of Sufia, a bamboo stool maker who got raw materials on credit from a moneylender and paid back the loan from sale proceeds. What was concerning to Younus was that the moneylender set both the price of the raw material and the price of the finished product, which he bought from Sufia. The profit Sufia made from this transaction was hardly adequate to meet her needs, but there were no other credit options available to Sufia, which may have led to a better profit margin. An ensuing survey in the area revealed that there were forty-two other people in a similar situation. Motivated by this, Younus provided his own money as credit to pay off the money-lenders and finance those businesses. His response marked the beginning of the Grameen Bank.[11]

Through various experiments over time and adaptations over regions, microfinance has evolved specific financial products and methods targeting poor people. For example, clients are attended to in their areas of business, contrary to the traditional requirement that a client visit the bank. Moreover, in order to create efficiencies, accounting systems and software appropriate for microfinance activities developed. Microfinance staff were also trained appropriately.[12] With access to more working capital, some clients were able to purchase stock in bulk and benefit from higher profit margins from retail trading. Others diversified into more lucrative products. Yet others invested in tools and equipment for business development.

Microfinance Criticism

In spite of reported success, critics felt that some benefits were exaggerated and argued that poverty reduced less than microfinance supporters have claimed. In societies where debt is not normally condoned, microfinance debt was viewed as creating unwanted stigma. Critics noted that sometimes communities require other services such as health care and schools more than microfinance, thus negating its efficacy. Critics also noted that the very poor and the rural poor are often excluded from microfinance programs. Further, the decisions of what is good or what works are often made without the input of poor people. Reports indicated that poor people do not favour working in groups but are compelled to do so by microfinance programming. Critics observe that due to lack of clarity on pricing, poor people have little understanding on the effective cost of funds that they borrow. Thus, although microfinance services are more expensive than the norm, this hardly became an issue of contention for poor people. The fact that Jobra, the Bangladeshi village where Muhammed Younus founded the Grameen Bank in the late 1970s, remains trapped in poverty 30 years later is used as evidence that wherever microfinance saturates the poor, poverty remains endemic.[13]

Ethnographic studies revealed cases where microfinance loans resulted in a new form of domination against poor women, whereby the women signed for the loans but men used the money. Studies also show that loans benefit the rural middle-class who can assure high repayments at the expense of the vulnerable poor.[14] A field staff of a microfinance institution shares frustrations in the discussion of one study:

> I am tired of visiting this neighborhood to pressure people. Yes Mrs. P. is responsible for the loan but she is sick and a widow. She has been harassed by women in her group and by me. I try to be very nice to her, but my job depends on good repayment. My clients do not tell me their troubles any more. Now I am a moneylender and I never hear their news…They do not see me as helping them but, as an enemy.[15]
>
> Poor people also expressed frustrations: "I spend a lot of time now thinking about my neighbors and who will pay back and who might not... Some I don't trust as much as I did. I worry that their choices may mean they cannot pay back their loans when it is time."
>
> One client in Egypt said, "Group members came to the house of my father where I lived after my husband had died suddenly. They pounded the door until the neighbors heard and demanded he pay the loan back. My father was shamed and asked me to leave."[16]

Microfinance practitioners have responded to these criticisms by instituting checks and balances to protect clients from unethical practices and by advocating that social performance be demonstrated through various indicators. These responses include the *Imp-Act* initiative to ascertain the real poverty reduction impact and the Smart Campaign to *help microfinance institutions focus on their real reason for existence, which is serving poor people.*[17] Notwithstanding, the criticisms have led to persistent inquiry about the efficacy of microfinance, with one survey respondent commenting:

> [T]he industry will face a huge reputational risk with the growing clash between opposing ideology and expectations. Is microfinance primarily about financial inclusion or poverty

alleviation? Is microfinance primarily a business opportunity or a development intervention? Does microfinance really meet both financial and social return expectations? Is it an "either or"? Or has microfinance many faces?[18]

As the debate within the industry rages, it begs an understanding of the poor's perspectives regarding their movements out of poverty and the most appropriate tools to help them do so.

An Understanding of the Perspectives of Poor People

Microfinance works on the assumption that poor people are entrepreneurs who need credit to grow their businesses. The reality is often far from this assumption. Often poor people are mostly looking for the safest means of earning an income. They are averse to risks associated with running a business, which often include "problems, including events, conditions, and people that impair the ability to conduct daily business operations . . . characterized by frequent occurrence, disruption, and idiosyncrasy."[19] Sometimes poor people do not use loans for business because they have "either limited capacity to use investment credit or more pressing needs for [financial] products that support consumption and income smoothing."[20]

Furthermore, in the absence of consistent wages, livelihoods that are based on acquiring income become vulnerable to the process of managing those scarce resources. Zollman and Collins elaborate by saying,

> In the absence of reliable lifetime employment, earning and allocating money are inseparable. . . . Cash flows are erratic and unpredictable. . . . Financial decisions that affect family living standards are small, daily expenditure and savings choices, requiring discipline more than analytical skill . . . financial decisions are relentless, unavoidable, and urgent. . . .[21]

This reality is unlike that of middle- or high-income earners, in which earning money and managing money are separable tasks. The reality of the poor requires responding appropriately to their needs. A study commissioned by the World Bank puts this into perspective:

> There are 2.8 billion poverty experts, the poor themselves. Yet the development discourse about poverty has been dominated by the perspectives and expertise of those who are not poor—professionals, politicians and agency officials. . . .
>
> What more can be more important than listening to the poor and working with our partners all over the world to respond to their concerns? . . . We are prepared to hold ourselves accountable, to make effort to try to respond to these voices.[22]

Yet the reality is that the voice of poor people will be compromised even where notional dialogue space is afforded them: poor people often lack the capacity to recognize the root causes of poverty and also often lack the competence to negotiate consequent livelihood solutions. In the midst of these dilemmas, the church and Christian microfinance institutions have embraced microfinance in response to their Christian call to social action.

Microfinance and the Church in Social Transformation

Some churches hailed microfinance as an appropriate solution for moving poor people from dependency to participating in their own development and potentially strengthening the local church. These understand that "by participating in microfinance programs, church members can develop occupational skills and learn financial discipline. . . . This strengthens the church by improving the economic situation of its members and by putting them in a better position to tithe or donate their time and resources."[23] Proponents of Christian microfinance recognize that the church is already well integrated in the community with access to community groups. They further observe that churches are trusted by borrowers as institutions that care. They are considered compassionate and seen to operate with integrity, which are important aspects for strong microfinance programs. In this regard, churches are regarded as better placed to reach the poorest of the poor.

In talking about the actions of the church in the development arena, Tsele recognizes that, while the church was prolific in incorporating development projects in education, health, and agricultural sectors within missionary endeavors, other development actors have now occupied the space. He asserts that for the church to strengthen its legitimacy in the development domain, there is "an obligation to demonstrate that the church brings something substantive, and that our commitment is driven by different motives."[24] Christian microfinance institutions face the challenge of defining that substantive difference, which would lead to transformation in the lives of the poor. Getu postulates that this happens through Christian microfinance institutions who serve poor people with financial services that enable transformation, innovation, nurturing, stewardship, partnership, and responsiveness. However, he is quick to acknowledge that more work is required to achieve these ideals.[25]

A View from Pentecostal Churches in Zambia

Zambia has a population of 15.2 million people. According to 2014 World Bank statistics, 74.3% live on under $1.25% a day (34% in urban areas and 80% in rural areas).[26] Given this high poverty prevalence, it is highly likely that Pentecostal churches in Zambia are home to a good number of people living in poverty. It is with this in mind that this study includes views from leaders of eight Pentecostal churches in Zambia, most of which have a network of both urban and rural branches. The interviews also include views from the general secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, the umbrella body for all evangelical churches, including Pentecostal churches. Thus the views generated represent interactions with a wide section of Pentecostal believers. The findings are given below and are organized under indicated thematic headings.

The Role of the Church in Poverty Reduction

Respondents acknowledged that the primary role of the church is to preach the gospel and disciple believers to spiritual maturity, with the goal of enabling them to share their faith in their communities. They also indicated that the church has a responsibility to participate in their members' lives for various reasons and circumstances and see this as part of their wider engagement in society. Most of the situations that they have had to deal with in this regard fall into three categories: Firstly, when members, through unforeseen circumstances fall into financial difficulties. Examples of these include sickness, a death of a church member or the member's family member, or emergencies like floods or droughts that create shocks needing more resource support beyond the norm. Secondly, when the livelihoods of church members show serious vulnerabilities and deprivations associated with poverty. Examples include inability to have decent meals, inability to pay for school fees and school requisites, or even inability to meet medical bills. Thirdly, where the church elects to have specific social and economic engagements in their communities as permanent features of the ministry. These include soup kitchens, orphanages, provision of education and health facilities. Some respondents indicated that they answer to all the three categories, while others one or two of the categories.

As indicated earlier, on one end of the spectrum are churches who advocate that poor people should come out of dependency and take up responsibility for their own lives. They base their engagement on 2 Thess 3:10-12, "those unwilling to work will not get to eat" (NLT). These churches identify the root causes of poverty as lack of faithfulness and sinful practices that need transformation in line with the word of God. On the other end of the spectrum are the churches that have a significant involvement in social action. They feel compelled to intervene in improving livelihoods, because they already have a presence in locations with high incidences of poverty. One such church bases their engagement on Deut 15:7-8 (ESV),

> If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God has given you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

This dichotomy of churches working at different ends of the spectrum reveals, nonetheless, their shared concern for people living in poverty. Hence, it is necessary to review the problems that lead to poverty as defined by the church leaders and how that understanding has informed the solutions employed.

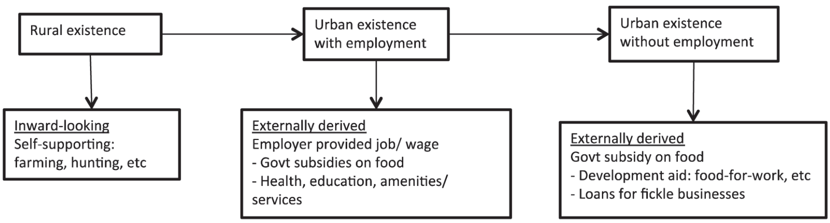
The Faces of Poverty

Respondents with a firm belief that poor people should take responsibility for their own lives come from an understanding that the root causes of poverty lie in humanity's sinful nature. Their interventions start with an assessment to determine what responsibility or irresponsibility led to a poverty situation in a church member's life, in order to provide appropriate counsel or intervention. They would therefore deal with tragedy differently from the way they would deal with a member who fails to pay school fees. The former would be viewed as more of an unforeseen occurrence and the later as a failure to plan. They believe that as people begin to leave sinful practices, walk in faith, learn generosity, and apply godly wisdom, they will start to make dramatic steps out of poverty. This belief sits on the understanding that root causes of poverty are dealt with as a believer has their mind and heart transformed by the word of God.

The respondents who are significantly involved in poor people's lives observe that poor families often depend on others to help them and the church becomes the first place to go to. Comments from those who took part in the interview attest to a dependency attitude among people living in poverty. Several leaders reiterate this dependency attitude as part of the challenge the church faces in helping the poor. According to one respondent,

> As we were praying for employment for young people, one was offered K5.00[27] and asked to use and multiply it. He laughed that he could not multiply it in a week. He returned the K5.00 after the week saying that there was no business that could use that paltry sum. He was advised to go and buy traditional brooms and resell them. He went and invested the K5.00 into sugarcane and turned the money into K30.00. He managed to raise a further K300.00 and went into banana business. Three months later he was nicely dressed and doing well at home.[28]

This attitude makes it difficult to arrive at sustainable solutions. I encountered this tendency in my recent research with communities and traced its beginnings in Zambia to the days of early industrialization. The industrialization process triggered rural-to-urban migrations in pursuit of mining employment. Employment brought income for livelihoods but at the same time removed the aspect of being inward-looking in the quest for income. People had to look to the employer for their livelihoods and thus began depending on external entities. This process is visualized in the diagram below, which traces the possible origins of dependency in Zambia.



Steps towards Solutions

The churches that are active in the lives of poor people explore various ways of helping them including possible business activities. However, they have found that the businesses tend to be fickle and profit margins small. Some churches facilitate training in basic skills in entrepreneurship and seek to encourage agricultural production for the rural congregations. Some encourage their members to form savings groups. To a large extent, the solutions call for money as a key resource. The respondents agree that this is in short supply and that the church is unable to meet poor people's needs. I then inquired if, in their quest for money, they had had any dealings with microfinance and what their experiences were like.

Interactions with Microfinance Organizations

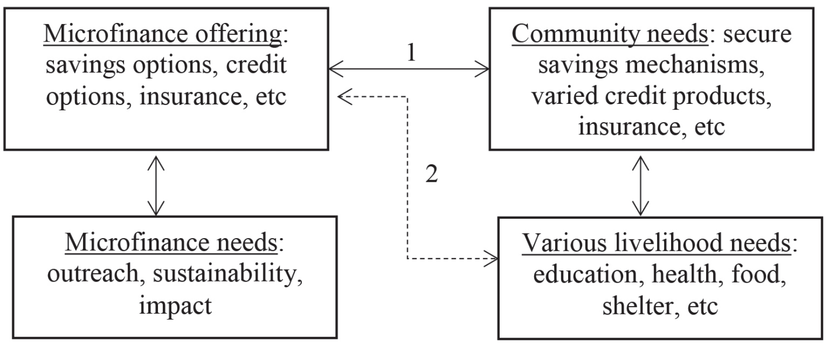
None of the respondents had any direct dealings with microfinance institutions on behalf of their members. A good number, including the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, started microfinance activities but quickly realized that it was not working when church members failed to pay back what they owed. In its place, a number of churches started and encouraged formation of savings groups.

The interview sought to find out what respondents think of microfinance as a poverty reduction strategy. The majority believe that microfinance does not work well in reducing poverty, although if it is implemented responsibly, it might bring about transformation by utilizing kingdom principles. There was a strong view amongst respondents that they would not refer any of their church members to microfinance institutions, because these institutions would not help members grow. Some respondents feel that microfinance is driven from a western agenda, which views Africa as this massive mess of poverty needing help, and as such does not prioritize preparing poor people to benefit from the intervention. Others believe microfinance perpetuates the narrative that if poor people get money from someone, they would be able to put their life together even without taking time to clarify how this would happen, if at all. This has the potential of portraying the churches that support microfinance as poor stewards of resources especially when poor people fail to pay or fall even deeper into debt.

The Church Exploring New Frontiers

Pentecostal churches in Zambia recognize that they have a role in the lives of their members beyond preaching. In looking at their interactions with microfinance, it became evident that generating money is important to help people out of depravity and the vulnerabilities that manifest from poverty. However generating money is difficult for various reasons, including the fact that poor people have dependency attitudes that negate efforts to secure long-term solutions. The church also simply does not have the kinds of resources needed to ensure long-term solutions. Even when they do give out the money, they have no way of knowing whether a need is truly met or not. This limitation then raises questions regarding the church's role. There is adequate discomfort among Pentecostal churches regarding the efficacy of microfinance practice to warrant questions regarding whether the root causes of poverty call for microfinance as an appropriate solution.

Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge that, although microfinance aims to impact poor people positively, it is a hard goal to attain, given that microfinance managers' primary objectives are skewed towards the needs and demands of their organizations. This means that moving people out of poverty will always take second place. Since it is only those experiencing poverty who can confirm livelihood changes, progressive interventions have to be rooted among them by understanding the underlying problems. This diagram visualizes the phenomenon of microfinance interacting with communities living in poverty.



The interaction between microfinance institutions and communities, represented by #1, is the first and only line of interaction with the community. Determining livelihood impact would require firstly understanding whether a financial service is addressing the part of the problem that is causing poverty, and then the beneficiary will have to confirm its efficacy. This is represented by #2 (the dotted line) where microfinance institutions do not interact with the community. At this level, the church is active and therefore successful intervention requires exloring the root cause of poverty and locate the perspectives of Pentecostal church leaders. The next section will aim to draw a perspective from the Bible.

Understanding the Root Causes of Poverty: A Biblical View

Bryant L. Myers recognizes that "the nature of poverty is fundamentally relational and its cause is fundamentally spiritual."[29] He notes that by creating humans to be fruitful, to increase in number and fill the earth, and subdue it, God established a common cultural foundation for all human enterprises. He asserts that as stewards of God's resources, humanity has specific responsibilities for sharing resources because all land and natural resources are gifts to all humanity. Myers highlights an interesting argument that the right for all to use the earth's resources predates the right to own, thereby challenging modern-day practices that bestow rights to resources on some people to the exclusion of others.[30]

Another way in which humanity stewards creation is through the responsibility to work. God created humans in his image to work and be productive. Therefore one has a duty to help people work so they can fulfill their purpose. In doing this, another expectation of growth is fulfilled. God's instruction to be fruitful and increase applies to the numerical growth of people, and also to the means to support them. Myers asserts, "God has given humankind the ingenuity and adaptability necessary to create this necessary increase."[31]

The last way humanity is responsible as stewards is by ensuring productivity that they can enjoy. As productive beings, there is an expectation to enjoy the end-product of one's work, which can happen only when people actually produce. As people begin to be productive and enjoy the fruits of their labours, poverty is dealt with.

The creation story ends with the fall, which works against the harmonious relationships that God designed. As a consequence, humans have become the harbinger of "widespread deception, distortion, and domination in all forms of human relationships—with God, within oneself (and family), within the community and between others, and with the environment."[32] These vices permeate the economic, political, and religious systems. As a result, the concept of stewardship is marred and replaced with notions of ownership and subjugation, with justice becoming the domain of the powerful to the detriment of those in poverty. Ultimately, the fall "affirms the radical nature of evil. . . . and should save us from any temptation toward optimistic belief in the ability of government or the free market or our own efforts at human transformation to change reality of the poor in and of themselves."[33] Without divine providence, the fall may have caused the end of the creation and human story.

Myers discusses this divine providence through the mission, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The core of Jesus Christ's mission was to restore the broken and distorted relationship caused by the fall. In his earthly teaching, he commanded his followers, "Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 23:26). His death on the cross epitomizes the abandonment of broken relationships, and brings divine forgiveness and redemption from sin. It is also at the cross that powers and principalities were disarmed, thereby dealing a blow to oppressive societal structures and injustice, as God placed Christ in control of all things (Col 2:20; Eph 1:22). The resurrection is the good news of transformation from death to life and is an action only God could author.

The church remains the representation of the ongoing work of God in the world. It is the bearer of the biblical story and Christ's body in the world. Myers states:

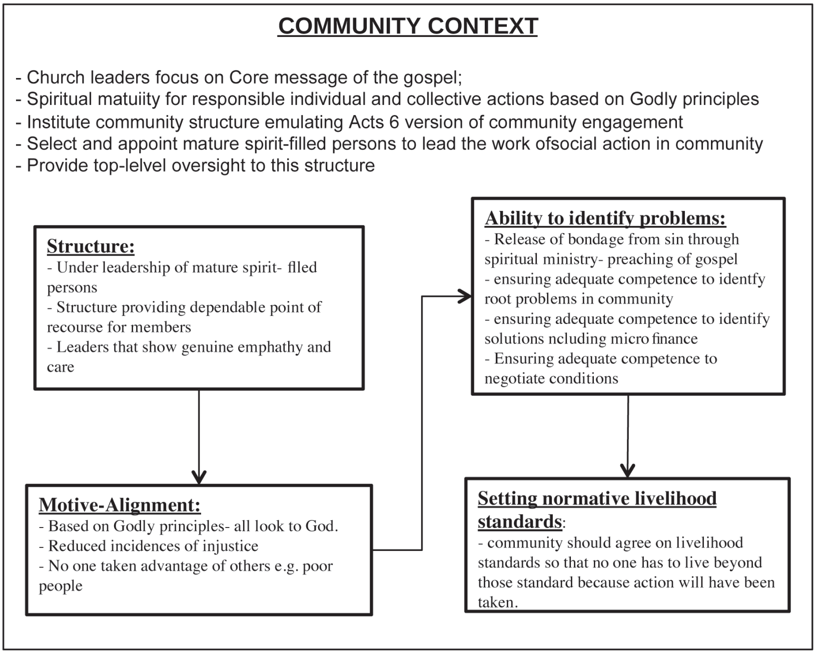
> The goal of the biblical story, then, is the reconciliation of all things, on earth and in heaven with Christ as the head. Relationships are restored in all the dimensions distorted by sin—the gospel is the news that distorted patterns of power have been broken; the reception of the gospel is the embrace of radically transformed patterns of social relationships.[34]

What does working with development interventions such as microfinance mean for a church that has embraced an understanding of poverty as described above? The starting point is realizing that Jesus was anointed "to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19). The good news includes a holistic understanding of all human enterprise.

The early church presents a prototype that the modern church can work with. In the early church, the newly Spirit-filled apostles were keen to promote the gospel, but they faced a complaint regarding food distribution. They realized that they could not neglect preaching the word in order to distribute food, yet that was also necessary. They decided to put together a structure managed by Spirit-filled leaders to enable equitable distribution (Acts 6:1–5). Just as the apostles felt the need to prioritize preaching the gospel and to distribute food to needy widows, so the modern church could use a similar approach. The church can do this by setting structures to serve the daily needs of people, while focusing on the core work of ministering the Word. The church is already present in the community with the good news that brings an awareness of sin and its practices, which is at the root of poverty as discussed above. The church can therefore consider community structures that emulate the spirit of Acts 6:1–5.

Creating Community Structures

In order to create empowering community structures, the following elements would need to be considered: context, structure, motive alignment, ability to identify problems, and setting normative standards. The context needs to facilitate the core message of the gospel towards spiritual maturity, which will help bring freedom and create a space for members to articulate their needs. The structure would consist of leaders who show love, empathy, and provide a dependable point of recourse, so that members can know how to handle vexing situations. Motive alignment must be based on godly principles that ensure continuous support to strengthen spiritual maturity in order to impact the community and strengthen others. The ability to identify problems would mean that as people are released from sin's bondage, they would recover their capacity to identify secondary issues affecting livelihoods that would need to be addressed with appropriate solutions for lasting impact. The solutions could include, but not be limited to microfinance. Lastly, setting normative standards would entail determining certain livelihood standards below which action would need to be taken. The following diagram provides a visual for an approach that churches could pursue.



Measuring Impact

Within this structure, there would be need to ensure that interventions are not only owned by members, but that they build on the spiritual maturity and actually produce impactful outcomes. Thus impact has to be measured within the community, with three elements being essential to ensure progressive outcomes: 1) that interventions are owned by members; 2) that they are built on the spiritual maturity; and 3) that they actually produce impactful outcomes. The process of determining the impact of interventions would be structured to respond to the following questions at the start of the intervention:

> What are the livelihood needs? The response at the outset will help determine if the proposed solutions will address the articulated need. When measuring impact, how the livelihood needs were addressed will be an important indicator for effectiveness.

> What financial services are needed? This question will help prescribe the type of financial service needed to address the

situation. When measuring impact, how the money was used will be an important indicator for the efficacy of the financial service.

How is the need for financial services going to be met? This question will help point to the actual provision of the financial service and understanding the intricate details such cost of funds (interest rates), rules of engagement with the service providers and any other stipulations that would need to be clarified.

In the final analysis, this process should lead to expansive learning for both the community and the various providers of services including microfinance practitioners.

Conclusions

This study recognizes the value and shortfalls of microfinance services. The article analyzes the views of Pentecostal church leaders in Zambia and confirmed the shortcomings of microfinance. The analysis also reveals a spiritual aspect to poverty in locating the root cause of poverty in sinful practices. Since sin is addressed through the mission, death, and resurrection of Christ, with the effect of restoring broken relationships, a means is already in place to adequately manage poverty. The early church in the Book of Acts provides a prototype for addressing human need within the context of preaching the gospel towards spiritual maturity. In this way the church can address poverty from a biblical standpoint.

Irene Banda (Mutalima) (ibamuta@gmail.com) serves as CEO of TUCUZA Associates, Ltd., Lusaka, Zambia.

Notes

1 This study draws on my PhD thesis entitled, "Responding to Poor People's Voices through Microfinance in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Action Research Study in Zimbabwe and Zambia" (a PhD dissertation, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and Middlesex University, 2016).

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