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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA AND EXTREME POVERTY

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Everyone knows about it. It is talked about so much that rarely do people feel any sympathy towards it anymore. Everybody has seen the advertisements, watched the news clips, and listened to the awareness concerts. The problem is poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa. Nearly every day there is something else on the news about the many problems in Africa. This leads to many questions. What exactly is poverty? Why are things so bad there? Is anything being done about the malnutrition and under-development? Finally, how did poverty get so bad in Sub-Saharan Africa, and are there any solutions? Poverty in this region is so complex that it must be broken down in order to get the big picture.

It is important to know what defines a person as poor or well-off. The Design and Management of Poverty Reduction Programs and Projects in Anglophone Africa, edited by Michael Bamberger, Abdullahi M. Yahie, and George Matovu, asserts that several factors define poverty. Poverty is determined by the individual and his or her household; it can also go as far as to define a whole region or country. This book states that infant mortality rate, food intake,

economic standing, nutritional status, and wage rate all play a key role in defining poverty and who is eligible for aid (34).

Economists also have classified just exactly how poor the individual or group of people might be. To differentiate where people fall on a poverty line, a worldwide system has been established. Jeffrey D. Sachs, in his book, The End of Poverty, explains that there are many different opinions on classifications of poverty and who is considered poor. Sachs goes on to say that some set facts, such as the three different levels of poverty, relative, moderate, and extreme, were established by the World Bank. Relative poverty is explained as being below middle class and not being able to afford many luxuries associated with the culture. Moderate poverty is when an individual lives on one to two dollars a day. People in the moderate poverty range are able to meet their basic needs but have a hard time doing so. The third level, which is extreme poverty, exists strictly in developing countries. The income in this level is less than a dollar a day. The people in this extreme category are not able to meet their basic needs and have a lack of other necessities such as clean water, decent education, or health care. Sachs summarizes, “Most of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are in extreme poverty” (20, 22).

It’s important to fully understand exactly what countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa. There are forty-seven countries located in this region. Sub-Saharan Africa includes all the countries located on the continent except for the ones on the northern tip of Africa, which are West Sahara, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt (Halloran; “African Countries”). A few of the countries in this region include Botswana, Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia to name a few (“African Countries”). As the geographical area becomes clear, it’s essential to know how the poverty situation got so devastating.

This problem of poverty is deeply rooted in Africa's history, especially with its economic history. As stated in The Design and Management of Poverty Reduction Programs and Projects in Anglophone Africa, "Many Sub-Saharan African countries gained their independence during the 1960's." During this time most new countries were excited about their new freedom and felt they were ready to handle and stabilize their economy. The governments expanded quickly and their enthusiasm was high (Bamberger, Yahie, and Matovu 3). State Power and Social Forces, edited by Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue, explains that by the 70's, most countries in Africa had experienced a huge slide downward in their economy (269). This downward slope was caused in part by the world going into a period of recession. The recession was followed by global inflation, which really turned the economy upside-down. Because of these events, Sub-Saharan African countries were hit especially hard with relentless payments to other countries so they could provide for their own people. To get through these hard times, many governmental regulations were increasingly restrictive. These new, tightened policies had a very negative impact on Sub-Saharan Africa. The standard of living went down, employment declined, and dreams of development disappeared. The governments' only option to pay off the expenses was to borrow money from foreign countries (Bamberger, Yahie, and Matovu 3).

Africa's problems continued in the following decade. This economic crisis came to its highest point in the mid-80's as the continent was overwhelmed with drought and famine (Migdal, Kohli, and Shue 271). To make matters worse, as the countries went further into debt, several cuts within the governments had to be taken. The many things wealthy countries take for granted became a scarcity for Sub-Saharan African countries. To pay for basic needs, many governments in this region had to cut most of the social service programs and the budget for

education and health care. These changes in the economy hit the poor especially hard. The poor had to spend all their earnings trying to pay for basic needs; as a result, education, health care, and other social services did not even reach them (Bamberger, Yahie, and Matovu 3, 29).

As the economy fell, the situation for the families in Sub-Saharan Africa steadily grew worse. The Condition of Young Children in Sub-Saharan Africa, written by Nat J. Colletta, Jayshree Balachander, and Xioyan Liang, also points out that while much of the world has been going forward, the number of families in Sub-Saharan Africa who are unable to provide for their basic needs has actually doubled. Also, the average income of a family has gone down by one third. For example, in certain areas of Cameroon, only one percent lived under the poverty line in 1983 but that percentage went up to twenty percent ten years later (3). According to World Poverty, edited by Peter Townsend and David Gordon, the situation did not get any better in the 90's as the percentage of people living off less than a dollar a day made no progress (378). With such devastating drops in the economy, why was not more being done to help?

Many programs and initiatives were brought up to help this poor region at that time, but sadly, many of these never completely worked. Kevin Cleaver, author of the book Rural Development Strategies for Poverty Reduction and Environmental Protection in Sub-Saharan Africa, explains that in the 70's and 80's, there were actually many strides taken in helping to develop Sub-Saharan Africa, yet they didn't work out for a number of reasons. Some of the main problems in these initiatives were simply bad policy. Also, the overall design of many of these projects had several errors. A weak government commitment along with the exclusion of the nongovernmental organizations yielded no tangible results for this poor region of Africa. The history of relief started to change in the 80's when the emphasis turned to a better plan of action for agriculture and economics (V).

Relief and assistance are still not sufficient as much of Africa is still so deeply entrenched in poverty. DATA, a non-profit organization with the acronym standing for debt, AIDS, trade, and Africa, states in the “Why Africa?” section of their website that “more than 300 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa live on less than one dollar a day” and “do not have access to clean water.” These conditions are horrible and can leave the population feeling very hopeless. America and other rich countries, as a whole, will probably never know this feeling of hopelessness. Most people would probably have a hard time even comprehending the atrociousness of the situation.

What exactly would it be like to be swept away in extreme poverty? In the summer of 2004, I saw first hand how bad the situation is when I was in Nairobi, Kenya, on a mission trip. During the two weeks I was there, my team and I traveled to many of the city’s worst slums. The poverty was unbelievable. In each slum there were thousands of people in a tiny part of the city, all living in tiny huts, and usually with large families living together. Disease was rampant, open sewers flooded the streets, and hopelessness hung in the air. Even if an individual was lucky enough to get an education, chances are he or she would never be able to leave the slum because of the lack of money and the abundance of diseases. Sadly, it is very unlikely that one will ever be able to leave this vicious cycle. This cycle of poverty is a never ending circle. Many obstacles keep people from the ability to provide for their basic needs. Many are born into poverty and some are stricken by diseases, but regardless of how they get into the situation, it is very difficult to get out.

Many things, including trade policies, can hold almost an entire continent down with poverty. DATA strongly believes that unfair trading policies are a part of why Africans cannot leave this cycle of poverty. Africa holds only two percent of the world trade, yet it holds twelve

percent of the world's population. It would not be easy to depend on others for basic needs; hence, the economy needs to improve so Sub-Saharan Africa can start supporting itself. Countries in Africa could earn a lot more money to improve the economy by exporting and processing their basic crops, but there is a twenty-five percent tariff attached to all processed goods, as DATA explains. Ghana cannot even support itself by processing and labeling its coffee and cocoa because of the large tax. This tax forces Ghana to export goods duty-free; sacrificing much of the money that could be made ("Why Africa?").

The geographical features also impact the poverty and economics of a country. Sachs explains that many people think that America earned all of its wealth, when really, the geographical attributes of the USA has contributed to much of the prosperity. America is fortunate to have many rivers, fertile soil, natural resources, and lots of coastline for ports. However, Sub-Saharan Africa is not as fortunate. Many countries in this region are landlocked and mountainous, making transportation of goods very difficult and expensive. Sachs also explains, "Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, has an ideal rainfall, temperature, and mosquito type that make it the global epicenter of malaria, perhaps the greatest factor in slowing Africa's economic development throughout history." These geographical problems increase the likelihood that a country will be swept away in poverty (57-59).

Another reason many African countries cannot get out of this cycle of poverty is the problem with debt. For many decades, Sub-Saharan Africa was spending more on debt than they were on education and health combined. With interest rates and loans to repay, the situation got out of control. However, it has gotten better in the past few years. In 1999, the International Monetary Fund's Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HICP) program provided debt relief to thirty-eight countries, with thirty-two of them being in Africa. Through this program, many countries

are now able to spend much more money on health and education programs (“Why Africa?”). Is there still hope for Sub-Saharan Africa because of good programs like the HICP? The HICP program and others like it are moving Africa in the right direction.

The United Nations is especially taking notice of those in poverty establishing the UN Millennium Development Goals. They launched these goals to “form a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and all the world’s leading development institutions. They have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest.” Some of these goals include eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, reduce child mortality, and combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases. If these goals were fully implemented by their deadline, 2015, then Sub-Saharan Africa would be affected in a huge and positive way (UN Mill. Dev. Goals).

Even after researching the staggering statistics and realizing the ever-declining economy, I still believe there is hope for this beautiful continent. Our God is a God of justice, and Sub-Saharan Africa is simply in great need of restorative justice. Restoration for the people and the economy is very important, as they have a direct affect on the rest of the world. Are there any solutions to move towards this restoration?

Many governmental agencies believe that solutions exist and that certain steps must be taken soon, like providing more job opportunities. According to the book, Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?, published by The World Bank, policies in the government that create more employment and growth is one step that is vital to reducing poverty. The World Bank claims that this would reap many benefits to the economy. They believe that if the growth rate reached five percent a year, then benefits would start to appear. This would actually cause the spending of the population to increase, allowing the governments to use more of their resources on education and health care. If these new resources effectively benefited the poor, then the

number of those below the poverty line would be able to seek better employment, which could be their ticket out of poverty (99).

Another essential ingredient in reducing poverty for Sub-Saharan Africa would be to improve upon the quality of life. The value of human life is immeasurable (World Bank 100). Social Problems in Africa, edited by Apollo Rwomire, calculates that “Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest infant mortality in the world. The average is 95 deaths per 1,000 live births, while the average for developed nations is 10 deaths per 1,000 births” (94). Also, every day in Africa there are 6,600 people who die from HIV/AIDS (“Why Africa?”). These rates are horrible, and something must be done immediately. World Bank includes that programs to fight HIV/AIDS and child mortality are top priority. The hard part is simply getting these programs where they are needed most. With the administration or governments being handled inadequately much of time, deliveries of program assistance rarely make their way down to the those in extreme poverty, where help is needed most (100, 101).

The uncertainties of the poor are endless, so providing the people with more support for day-to-day troubles would also be part of the solution for reducing poverty. People stuck in extreme poverty have to worry about many things that much of the world rarely even thinks about. Most do not know if or when they will receive their next meal. The mortality rate of AIDS is terrifying, the children aren't getting a sufficient education, and decent healthcare is not accessible. The World Bank concludes that providing the poor with more “stability and security” is a key role in reducing poverty. They add that by giving the poor population better services, this could provide a “safety net” to help them through. Some of these services include better capabilities for water distribution and better programs to help manage crops. The

governments need to step in to provide their people with more security in Sub-Saharan Africa so the population can begin to take the necessary steps out of poverty (102).

Changes in Sub-Saharan Africa's future involve great obstacles. Their economic history has been one of marginalization. The situation is serious, yet hopeful. The World Bank strongly believes that Africa really can "claim the new century," and get out of the "vicious cycle of underdevelopment, conflict, and untold human suffering for most of the 20th century" (X). The World Bank sums up that more job opportunities, more HIV/AIDS prevention programs, and a more stable society are essential to leaving this cycle of extreme poverty (99-102).

The drastic poverty situation in Sub-Saharan Africa is not a problem that is just happening "over there." I think many people, and specifically many Americans, are not too concerned about this issue because "it is just Africa," and there is still so much racism in the world. Simply because this is not happening in our country is not a reason to take a passive view on this problem. This situation does affect us and the burden will be on our shoulders as history writers will eventually write down that most people did nothing to help. The extreme poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa is not right, and no deserves to live in those conditions. Where is the justice for those stuck in this cycle of poverty? The Bible calls us to ensure justice to those who are perishing and to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves (*New Living Translation*, Psalms 31:8-9). God has a special concern for the poor, so we should as well. I strongly believe we, especially Christians, should seek justice for the people in Sub-Saharan Africa. This means taking an active role in helping, staying informed, and praying for those affected.

Through the research that I have done, I have learned that extreme poverty is very complex and there are no simple solutions. However, some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are on the road to recovery. They committed themselves to reforms and are ready to move forward.

Other countries, on the other hand, are still trapped in the cycle of poverty (World Bank X). In the book Hemmed In, editors Thomas M. Callaghy and John Ravenhill offer a quote from Michael Chege in his work Remembering Africa that sums up the poverty situation in Africa. Chege writes, “Only with the emergence of African states that foster individual freedoms and market economies with complementary public sectors will the continent receive the attention it deserves. African societies might then graduate from being passive recipients of charity to full actors in global politics and economics” (1).

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