

Christians Facing the Challenge of Poverty: The Case of FJKM Ambohidavenona Lovasoa

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Abstract

This article talks about poverty and Christian commitments in the face of it. This article is important because it brings a new practice to fight poverty. It's destiny for political and theologian who emit the politic of developpement. Poverty is a situation caused by the destabilization of society. The poor are sometimes victims of oppression and injustice. This situation can affect anyone, even Christians. But God created man to live in good situation and prosperity. He wants to lift man out of poverty. Indeed, the theme of this article is: Christians and the challenge of poverty in the case of Ambohidavenona. To address this subject, it is essential to know the aspect of poverty in this environment, as well as the Christian commitment to face it. Even though the initiatives and actions of the church, the Christians of Ambohidavenona still live in general, economic, social and spiritual poverty. Overcoming poverty is truly God's plan. It would then be appropriate to improve the attitude of the rich towards the poor, consolidate Christian solidarity, intensify work as a source of income and, above all, strengthen faith in God. So the practice of theology of liberation, based on Christian commitment to the poor.

Keywords

theology of liberation, Christian commitment, poverty, God's plan, Christian solidarity



I. Introduction

According to the European Union, the poor are people excluded from society because of material, cultural or social inadequacy (Lollivier, 2008).

According to Debergé: For the men and women of the Bible, the poor are above all those who find themselves in a situation of inferiority, weakness or dependence, which makes them the prey of the rich and powerful (Debergé, 1999).

The poor are also the sick, the destitute, the suffering, those affected by mortality and indebtedness (Monloubou, 1968). Poverty is a state of material, social or economic lack or deprivation (Lasida et al., 2009).

God created man in his own image, to live in happiness, goodness and prosperity (Belier, 1961). According to Scripture, sin is the source of poverty (Exodus 22:20-23). Prosperity is God's blessing. Material poverty, on the other hand, is God's punishment for the ungodly (Debergé, 1999).

According to Lamennais, poverty is a problem caused by the destabilization of the social structure, as well as by the poor organization of a country's wealth. Thus, poverty does not come from God, but is the effect of corruption and man's love of wealth. Poverty is the daughter of man's sin, born of self and society (Biéler, 1982).

And so it was that God's plan for mankind was destroyed. Therefore the source of unhappiness, the misery of man and society as well as an entire country.

Poverty does not come from God, nor is it inevitable (Buisson, 1968). For Jesus said: "I have come that men may have life, and have it more abundantly" (John 10:6).

In this case, the fight against poverty is a path to follow in the development of God's plan. In other words, Christians must continue to fight poverty in order to follow God's path.

However, the number of poor and destitute people continues to grow (Blaser, 1983). As in the case of the Christians of Ambohidavenona Lovasoa, who live in poverty. Ambohidavenona is a rural area rich in natural resources, but 80% of Christians are poor. The people never stop working, cultivating and tilling the land, but their situation remains one of poverty. What's more, 90% of the populations are Christians, but the people are starving and their produce doesn't even cover their daily or periodic needs.

Thus the problematic: How can the Christians of Ambohidavenona eradicate poverty in their area?

Questions then arise about the challenge facing Christians in the face of poverty:

1. How does poverty manifest itself in Ambohidavenona?
2. How does the Church react to poverty?
3. What measures will the Church take in the face of poverty?

The hypotheses to be tested are:

1. Poverty in Ambohidavenona is human poverty.
2. The fight against poverty requires a commitment on the part of the Church.

The aim of the work is to demonstrate that theology of liberation is a new initiative for Ambohidavenona's Christians in the face of poverty.

This work is useful for development actors as well as for theologians who need to reorient their theological vision to participate in the fight against poverty.

II. Research Methods

The hypothetico-deductive method will be applied. The concepts of poverty and the Christian commitment to this situation must be enumerated. The study leads to a new conception of theology in the fight against poverty.

The method of information gathering is documentary study and internet research. The qualitative research methodology will also be used for the case study. The survey is based on a study of poverty in Ambohidavenona, in order to establish the measures to be taken to tackle this poverty. Participant observation is carried out to identify the causes of poverty and the commitments of Ambohidavenona's Christians in the face of this situation.

Materials used for research:

The household survey enabled us to show the location and poverty situation of Christians in Ambohidavenona.

For data processing, we used a type of analysis based on the variable. This is a socio-economic analysis of these Christians. The study of the different variables shows the manifestation of poverty in the environment. The percentage of wages per section gives an idea of the financial situation of households. The school enrolment rate indicates the intellectual level of the population. Knowledge of the population's diet and life expectancy also determine their state of health.

Interpretation of the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) "Report on Overcoming Human Poverty" (2000) allows us to assess the manifestation of poverty in this environment. Having determined the materials and methodologies used, we now turn to the analysis of the results.

III. Results and Discussion

The analysis of results is based on a survey of 137 households in 2021. How does poverty manifest itself in Ambohidavenona? What are the Christian commitments in the face of this situation? This question relates to the study of the different variables and their impacts, both economic and social, which we address in the paragraphs below.

3.1 The Manifestation of Poverty in Ambohidavenona

A brief study of the geographical environment and population count would be useful to better understand Ambohidavenona and its surroundings. A socio-economic study will describe Ambohidavenona's poverty. Where is Ambohidavenona, then, and how are its Christians distributed?

a. State of Place

In terms of demographics, the FJKM (Fiangonan'i Jesoa Kristy eto Madagasikara) Ambohidavenona establishment is located 60 km from Antananarivo in the Ambohidavenona fokontany, rural commune of Alatsinainy Bakaro, Andramasina district, and Analamanga region. Synodamparitany Atsimon'Iarivo Miray. With a tar road up to about 20km from National Road n°1 and a secondary road.

Located on the outskirts of the town, access to the National Road is difficult. And the poor state of the road is already making it difficult for farmers to sell their produce in Antananarivo and access the necessities of life. However, the market price of production is lower (sometimes not in line with nourishment and labor costs). This leads to higher transport costs, especially during the rainy season.

For counting, the table below summarizes the number of Christians in Ambohidavenona. It was obtained from the household survey. It also shows the distribution of Christians by section.

Table 1. Number of Christians

Sub-section	Total
Ambohidavenona	145
Tsarasaotra	157
Ampoza - Marinjara	218
Toetramboa - Ankafotra	96
Total	616

Source: Author

In general, the total number of Christians is around 616. Only 50% are active. The cause of this inactivity is neglect and ignorance of the importance of worshipping God. Lack of trust in God as creator and owner of all also causes Christian inactivity. 30% of Christians say that lack of money triggers inactivity in worship.

Ambohidavenona is a sparsely populated rural area. What are its economic and social characteristics?

b. Socio-economic Situation

Once we've seen the state of Ambohidavenona, we'll move on to the socio-economic situation, in order to get a better idea of how poverty manifests itself. It is then essential to study both the economic and social indicators deduced from the survey. What is the population's main source of income? Does this source of income affect nutrition and schooling? What is the population's life expectancy and water use? How do these variables affect the population's social status?

1. Source of population income, food and schooling

A concrete result on the assessment of poverty in Ambohidavenona is needed. To do this, we need to know the population's source of income. The following table shows the population's source of income by section.

Table 2. Percentage of source of income by section

Source of income Sub-section	Main activities		Additional activities	
	Activities	(%)	Activitie	(%)
Ambohidavenona	Agriculture	100	Spade and tobacco trade	30
Tsarasaotra	Agriculture	100	Grocery and gargote	10
Toetramboa - Ankafotra	Agriculture	100	Weaving	5
Ampoza - Marinjara	Agriculture	100	Weaving	10

Source: Author

According to the survey, the main source of income for Ambohidavenona's Christians is agriculture. 10% receive money daily, but the majority receives it weekly (15,000 Ar to 25,000 Ar). 5% receive money per month, like teachers and children who work as maids. What's more, 80% of Ambohidavenona's Christians have only a small plot of land to cultivate. As a result, their production depends on climate change, their production techniques are still traditional, and livestock farming is plagued by disease.

About power supply, almost all the people of Ambohidavenona do not eat rice, but rely on potatoes, cassava, corn, sweet potatoes, etc. as a staple diet. The lack of land for rice-growing is also the source of this food shortage. 80% of Christians buy rice during the year. 80% of Ambohidavenona's Christians suffer from lack of food.

About school attendance, only 30% of children attend school. And only 5% of these children can go on to secondary school. Few households can support their children through to higher education. Because of their unstable income, parents can't afford to pay their children's school fees (Rakotomalala & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2023). What's more, they tend to make their children work after graduating from CEPE (Certificat d'Etudes Primaires Elémentaires). For them, education is not yet important. It's enough for children to know how to read and count money to survive. The school enrolment rate is low.

The Christians of Ambohidavenona farm for both food and income, so they only sell their produce when necessary or for a specific reason. Thus food and schooling constraints.

What about life expectancy and water source?

2. Life expectancy and drinking water

In general, Christians are healthy; on average, their life expectancy is around 70 years. Sometimes, due to custom and traditional culture, illness is the main source of mortality. In fact, people still rely on ancestral healers in case of illness.

As for the use of drinking water, it is still insufficient for the Christians of Ambohidavenona. 50% of Christians use wells, but the remainder use rivers or natural springs.

After the geographical delimitation and socio-economic indicators of Ambohidavenona's Christians, what about the Church's reaction to poverty?

3.2 The Church's Commitment to Poverty

Faced with this situation, the Church is committed to helping the needy, but this commitment does not affect the whole population (only 12% of the population). What's more, the activity carried out was not permanent but temporary (only once a year). The budget for charitable work for the poor was limited (3% of the church's annual budget).

In 2017, the choirs of the FJKM Ambalavao Isotry practiced evangelism in Ambohidavenona. They took part in charitable aid such as clothing donations, doctor consultations and free medicines. Evangelism accompanied by social aid has a positive impact on the number of Christians, but not on poverty reduction.

The Church also contributes to the spiritual liberation of the poor through worship, which is open to all. In fact, preaching is one of the sources of liberation.

In short, Ambohidavenona is a rural area. The variables studied show that Christians have both economic and social difficulties. A discussion will be held to assess the poverty of Ambohidavenona's Christians.

3.3 Discussion

To assess poverty in Ambohidavenona, we need to compare the data collected with the UNDP document. A new perspective on poverty reduction will then be suggested. Are Christians really poor? What then would be the challenge in the face of poverty?

a. Synthesis

According to the UNDP's "Report on Overcoming Human Poverty" in 2000: A person lives in extreme poverty if he or she does not have sufficient income to meet basic food needs-usually defined on the basis of minimum caloric requirements. A person lives in general poverty if he or she does not have sufficient income to meet essential non-food needs such as clothing, energy and housing. Human poverty, on the other hand, is presented as the absence of basic human capabilities: illiteracy, malnutrition, reduced longevity, poor maternal health, preventable disease.

By analyzing the results, the low source of income, malnourishment, low school enrolment, source of mortality due to traditional culture, insufficient drinking water shows that the population of Ambohidavenona lives in general poverty and human poverty.

According to Martin, 2012 "Source of Income: Average and sufficient income: 1.25 dollars each day each person on average for developing countries".

The source of household income for Christians in Ambohidavenona reaches the daily threshold of around 4000-5000 ar each day. This source of income does not cover household needs. So the Christians of Ambohidavenona don't reach the daily income threshold necessary to survive. This confirms that they are economically poor.

So far the poor and unfortunate are the priority object of God's salvation (Royon & Philibert, 1994). Christians must not turn a blind eye to poverty in society.

According to the results, the FJKM Ambohidavenona Lovasoa Church is involved in the fight against poverty, but within a limited framework that is not appropriate for everyone.

A new perspective will then be approached so that these Christians participate in liberating the oppressed and improving the lives of the poor.

b. Suggestion

Poverty is a consequence of the destabilization of society, so development actors have roles to play in this situation. Including Christians, they are the key players in the fight against poverty according to God's plan. To reduce poverty in Ambohidavenona, Christian attitudes will be adopted (Raharinosy, & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2024). Can theology of liberation be adopted as a new attitude towards poverty?

1. Christian Attitudes towards Poverty

This sub-section presents Christian attitudes towards the poor. The rich must help the poor according to God's law of love. Christians must show solidarity (Raharinosy, & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2024). The Besogne ethic is God's ethic, which Christians must imitate.

2. Attitude of the rich towards the poor

The Christians of Ambohidavenona are not all poor. 20% of them have a stable and prosperous life. However the rich are the bosses of the poor, and they don't have the right attitudes towards them. So a change in the attitude of the rich towards the poor is a necessary condition for the liberation of the poor.

Moreover, the existence of the poor is a vocation to take responsibility for them (Deuteronomy 15:1). According to Dominique Barthélemy, the charity of the rich towards the poor marks their existence before God (Barthélemy, 2009). Our regard for the poor will be judged eternally (parable of judgment) (Buisson, 1968). God is the defender of the oppressed, the humble, the weak, the poor, and the just. God then appears as the enemy of oppressors, the powerful, the proud, the hoarders, injustice in general (Leonetti, 1954). The way we relate to the poor is a decisive criterion of judgment (Royon & Philibert, 1994).

3. Christian Solidarity

To help the poor is to act under the commandment of love. For to love God is first and foremost to love one's brothers and sisters, the destitute, the excluded. So God's chosen people have a duty towards others, especially the poor (Royon & Philibert, 1994).

Charity is necessary for Christians. It's not about having an excess; it's about helping those in need. Christians cannot ignore the issue of poverty if they are to establish their mission in imitation of Jesus, who evangelized about the poor (Buisson, 1968).

Christians must be generous and responsible if they are to despise poverty. Following the example of the Protestant missionaries who began their mission with charity towards the pagans. All their efforts were directed towards evangelization. Their activities are in the field of social and charitable aid (Laurent, 1984). Poverty-related aid has always been a challenge for Christians.

The challenge of combating poverty is to combat sin as well as the imperialism of a country (Biéler, 1982). Christians are invited to manage their resources well, and not to take advantage of them to have a greater share than others. It's a question of equitable distribution (Buisson, 1968).

Human and spiritual solidarity is intense; the salvation of one is a pledge for all. To combat poverty, we need God's love and union with the poor (Royon & Philibert, 1994). Following the example of early Christian life: "all in common-common good". There were no poor among them, because there was an equitable distribution of goods (Leonetti, 1954).

God's goal is social equity. Despite the destabilization of today's society, there is hope for the oppressed and the poor. It is union in God (Cosmao, 1982).

What do we mean by Christian ethics?

4. Work ethic

According to the Word of God, God created man in his own image. He was created to govern the world. By God's grace, man is invited to use his talents (Bélier, 1961). Being accountable to God is the Protestant ethic that combats poverty (Alexander & Tschopp, 1991). The work ethic is the Protestant ethic. According to Calvin, work is God's vocation. Being responsible to God's call is desirable and brings prosperity to society. Working hard and well, like God, is one of these challenges in the face of poverty.

The Christians of Ambohidavenona can grow crops seasonally, not just farm. They must break the circle of poverty by changing their habitual and traditional behavior. (Raharinosy, & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2024)

In view of Ambohidavenona's poverty and Christian commitment to poverty, is there then a new way of practicing theology to reduce poverty?

c. Theology of Liberation

Theology of liberation presents itself as an alternative way of reducing poverty. What is theology of liberation? What are its foundations and principles? What is the aim of this theology?

1. The Concept of Theology of Liberation

Latin America was the origin of the new concept of theology of liberation. And this concept grew out of the social, cultural and economic constraints it faced. Therefore, the foundation of theology of liberation in Latin America (Dussel, 1974).

Ratzinger (Ratzinger, 1984) fortifies that theology of liberation is a theological and pastoral movement originating in Latin American countries. It refers to a special concern for the poor and victims of oppression, which generates a commitment to justice.

According to Chenu, theology of liberation is a theology that speaks to and from the poor (Chenu, 1987).

Theology of liberation is a form of political theology for the Second Vatican Council at the Medellin Conference in 24 August to 16 September 1968. It is a theology that scorns poverty and seeks to practice the liberation of the oppressed in confrontation with the word of the Lord lived and received in faith. The theology of politics presents itself as a Christian ethic of commitment. This theology is politically limited: in what sense can the theological concept of love become an effective political concept? (Souletie, 2009).

2. The Foundation and Principle of Theology of Liberation

According to Marx, liberation is based on action and history (Randrialiva & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2023). He asserts that liberation is a historical fact, not an intellectual one, and it is brought about by historical conditions, by the progress of industry, trade, agriculture...these absurdities: substance, subject, self-consciousness and pure criticism, just like religious and theological absurdity..., these developments of ideas,

these idealized and ineffective poverties, replace absent historical developments: they become embedded and must be fought (Marx, 1968).

For Baum, the option for the destitute comes from Scripture, where God is on the side of the destitute, but not from Marxism. He confirms that: "The central point of theology of liberation is the preferential option for the poor and destitute" (Baum, 1987).

According to Gutiérrez, theology of liberation is a contextualized theology: it's not just good for the region it comes from (Gutiérrez, 2007).

The central point of theology of liberation "is to emphasize that God's love is universal and, at the same time, preferential for the poor and insignificant." (Gutiérrez, 2007)

3. The Aim of Theology of Liberation

Social inequality, which is one of the main sources of poverty, will never be eliminated because of social injustice and the domination of the powerful. According to Marx, class struggle is one of the solutions to poverty. If there are always dominant classes in society, poverty will always persist (Blaser, 1983).

According to Gutiérrez, despite social injustice and inequality, the poor are favored before God. For him: "The aim of theology of liberation is to give Christians, following Jesus, a contribution to their commitment to justice and their witness to the world" (Gutiérrez, 2007).

Theology of liberation is a theology aimed at liberating and improving the lives of the poor and marginalized. This theology is an act of faith to help and reassure the poor and destitute of society (Raharinosy, & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2024). Ambohidavenona's Christians can establish their own theology of liberation according to their social and economic context.

IV. Conclusion

Of course, poverty is the result of the corrupt organization of human society. So it can be combated and reduced. The Church also has a responsibility to participate in this struggle.

For centuries, certain organizations have tried to combat poverty. Despite this, there are still people who find themselves in a situation of total poverty. The church is an instrument of God's plan to bring about good. Commitment to the poor is therefore a challenge for Christians.

Theology of liberation is a new theological practice in Latin America, aimed at liberating the oppressed and improving the living conditions of the poor. This theology is an act of faith to help and reassure the victims of poverty and injustice in society. Christians can then establish their own theology of liberation according to their social and economic context.

In the case of Ambohidavenona, a rural area, analysis of the data shows that Christians face both economic and social difficulties. In fact, the population's source of income is agriculture. Their production doesn't cover their food and social needs. In this case, human and general poverty persists in Ambohidavenona.

Faced with this poverty, the Church is taking initiatives, but to a limited extent. So the necessity to be generous and solidary of the poor, and to work hard and well. Ambohidavenona's Christians need to adopt theology of liberation as a new theological concept.

In spite of this, poverty is still a reality in society, according to Jesus (Matthew 26:11 / John 12:8 / Mark 14:7).

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