



An exploration of perceptions on poverty: The case of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa at Alice Region Eastern Cape – A qualitative approach

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Abstract

This paper sought to explore the perceptions of and the experiences of Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) Alice Region in alleviating poverty. The study from which this paper is derived, was informed by a qualitative approach using a case study design. The study also used interviews complemented by focus group discussions as data collection methods. The study comprised 20 participants who remained anonymous, that were selected through the use of a purposive sampling technique. The study revealed the following thematic findings: Poverty is associated with diseases, poverty is associated with the phenomenon of divorce, poverty is associated with homelessness, there is lack of employment, and poverty is also linked to inequality. The paper employed a pastoral care approach as a theoretical or conceptual framework and made the following recommendations: There is need for the MCSA to have a committee that will formulate structures for sustaining projects for poverty alleviation to give an account of finance utilization. The MCSA should take into account all the special conditions that are associated with poverty alleviation. The church should also be concerned about people who are impoverished and have no accommodation, food and clothes, for instance, and ascertain their actual living conditions. MCSA, Department of Social Development, NGOs and the Department of Health should work together to strategize on fighting against poverty in the Alice Region. There is a need for a collaborative effort by different stakeholders to strategize on a fight against poverty. The Methodist Church should develop a poverty eradication policy and integrate this into its existing policies. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa should integrate policy formulation so that the fight against poverty may also be established within the MCSA policy.

Keywords: Poverty, Methodist Church, Eastern Cape province, South Africa

Introduction and background

The researchers' approach to the topic takes the definition of the notion of poverty as a starting point to reflect on the role of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) in poverty alleviation in the Alice Region of the Eastern Cape province in South Africa. The researchers



used twenty respondents and delve into a brief discussion of the findings. This paper begins by highlighting the concept of poverty and the biblical approach to the notion of poverty.

Poverty is defined in a narrow sense because some scholars restrict poverty in their definition. Even though other scholars define poverty in a broader sense, it is even broader in reality. Poverty can also be defined more relationally and holistically as including the exclusion or exploitation of particular groups, historical and systemic discrimination and lack of education or opportunity to access the economy (Kretzshmar, 2014:5). There is a close relationship between hunger and poverty. In purely economic terms, poverty can be defined as 'the inability of individuals, households or communities to command sufficient resources to satisfy a socially acceptable minimum standard of living' (Childhood Poverty in South Africa, 2002:1 of 4).

Poverty is invariably linked to lack of basic needs including food, clothing and shelter. Although, poverty is linked to the above, not having money does not mean one is impoverished. In attending to the realities of poverty, there are basic needs that a person must have to continue existing, such as food, clothing and shelter. If a person has no means of access to these basic needs, then that person is more impoverished. Kretzschmar (2014: 6) stresses that in personal and practical terms, poverty is a brutal human experience of ill-health, unemployment, struggle and a sense of powerlessness to affect change.

The World Bank Organization (2012: 2) pronounces poverty thus:

"Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and across time, and has been described in many ways. Most often, poverty is a situation people want to escape. So poverty is a call to action -- for the poor and the wealthy alike -- a call to change the world so that many more may have enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in their communities".

The South African Constitution's Bill of Rights states that everyone has the right to housing, health care services, sufficient food and water and social security. However, the government can only provide for these rights subject to available resources. Adopting legislation to give effect to these rights is one of the means to their realisation. Several claims have also been made in the Constitutional Court to assert these rights. The legal right not to be poor is advocated, especially for Africans, but the content of the right is indeterminable (South Africa Government, 1997: 60).

Research Design and Methodology

The researchers used a qualitative approach. Qualitative research entails a generic approach to research where the research takes, as its exit point, the insider's perspective on action (Babbie, 2010: 229). Quantitative research, on the other hand, entails specifically measuring variables and testing hypotheses linked to general informal explanations (Mouton, 2008: 70). The study adopted a case study as its research design was informed by both exploratory and descriptive approaches.

Research interviews involve acquiring information about one or more groups of people by asking them questions and recording their answers (Leedy & Ormrod, 2004). An interview is designed in three ways, namely: correlation, cross-sectional and longitudinal. This study adopted one-on-one interviews complemented by focus group discussions as its data collection methods.



Sampling size sampling method

The sample of this study comprises 20 participants, namely: 6 Ministers (Ministers from various Circuits within the Alice Region in the Grahamstown District of Methodist Church of Southern Africa), 6 Circuit Stewards and 8 congregants. These participants were of mixed gender from 18 years and above. This is part of the group that was targeted from the Methodist Church that serves in the programme alleviating poverty. The gender ratio for the study was 13 males and 7 females who participated in this study. The study used a purposive sampling technique as its tool to select research participants. Ethical aspects were observed in the study and respondents remained anonymous as pseudonyms were used, and they were free to withdraw at any time during the course of the study.

Data analysis

This paper uses the thematic analysis in presenting data collected from the research site. Nominal data are categorised according to descriptive or qualitative information such as demographic information (Lane, 2009: 4).

Table 1: Demographic Information for Respondents

Pseudonomic identifier	Age	Gender	Marital status	Level of Education	Socioeconomic status
Rev A	53	Male	Single	Tertiary	Employed
Rev B	62	Male	Married	Tertiary	Employed
Rev C	41	Male	Married	Tertiary	Employed
Rev D	66	Male	Widow	Secondary	Pensioner
Rev E	37	Male	Single	Tertiary	Employed
Rev F	59	Male	Divorced	Tertiary	Employed
Respondent G	38	Male	Single	Secondary	Unemployed
Respondent H	66	Female	Widow	Primary	Pensioner
Respondent I	23	Female	Single	Tertiary	Unemployed
Respondent J	66	Male	Married	Primary	Pensioner
Respondent K	63	Female	Married	Secondary	Employed
Respondent L	52	Female	Widow	Secondary	Self-employed
Respondent M	44	Male	Married	Tertiary	Employed
Respondent N	64	Male	Married	Primary	Employed
Respondent O	39	female	Single	Secondary	Employed
Respondent P	43	Male	Married	Primary	Employed
Respondent Q	62	Female	Divorced	Primary	Employed
Respondent R	66	Female	Widow	Primary	Pensioner
Respondent S	67	Male	Married	Primary	Pensioner
Respondent T	44	Male	Married	Tertiary	Employed

The demographic information from the questionnaires showed that old aged people are more dominant in participating in the projects concerned with poverty alleviation within the small projects influenced by Methodist Church in the community. People from the age of 65 and above are keen on farming projects, hence their dominance of 25% than other ages. Young people aged 18-25 show low participation rates in farming projects although 5% of them did participate. As young adults, some of those who are in ages 26-35 showed an interest in issues of poverty alleviation while 15% of them are participating in such projects. Those who are between the ages of 36 and 55 also participated in the fight against poverty, and these constitute 15% of the participants. The age group 56-64 made up 20% of the total number dedicated to project work against poverty.

The results represented on the issue of gender show that a large proportion (65%) of the respondents was males while 35% of the respondents were females. The results show that both genders are represented in the area of study. This also shows an imbalance of gender distribution in the Alice region.



The majority of the people who live in the Ntselamanzi Township either do not have any education or have only primary/secondary school level education, and only a few have tertiary education. Those without formal education constituted 5% of the sample, with those with primary level education being 45%. To add, 30% of the participants had secondary level education, and 20% are tertiary educated. Education is the key source towards alleviating poverty (Warren 2007). The MCSA uses education as the strongest pillar to alleviate poverty. In his research, Roli stated that the church found that most people dropped out of school in their crucial stage, namely, the adolescent stage (Roli, 2001: 77). Most people who dropped out of school during adolescence were females. When they begin to mature physically, they experience physical and psychological difficulties. Some are impoverished and go through menstruation without sanitary towels. Some are afraid to ask for money to buy sanitary towels; some come from poor families and feel inferior to their fellow learners when menstruating. Some female learners feel inferior because of the cultural misunderstandings around menstruation process. Most people who live in the area of the study misconstrue menstruation as an unclean process even though it is something that is entirely natural. Learners from the area, therefore, often decide to leave school due to these misunderstandings. During the menstruation, they have no access to sanitary pads but use unhygienic pieces of clothing that later cause infection (Personal Conversation with Mngxuma, 12 July, 2014).

The Annshaw Circuit No.233 located within the area of the Nkonkobe Local Municipality identified some schools that were in need of sanitary towel support. Both high schools and primary schools were supported by this circuit of MCSA. High school female learners were given the bulk of sanitary pads while primary school learners received the distributed bath toiletry, and school uniforms were bought for both males and females based on their individual need. The findings of the current study showed that males drop out of school during their adolescent period due to peer pressure. There were no valid reasons for them to leave school before completing matric or tertiary education. The Presiding bishop of MCSA, Rev ZD Siwa emphasised in his conference address that the issue of education is a tool to alleviate poverty within the nation and the broader connection of the MCSA, which includes six countries. Those countries are Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique and South Africa (MCSA Yearbook, 2013). In this study, income received from social grants accounted for most income received by the respondents, with a percentage of 40% of them being social grant recipients. The majority (55%) of respondents are dependent on the Old Age Grant for their survival, and 5% depend on the Child Support Grant. Respondents who depend on salaries and wages for their sustenance made up 40% of the participants. Most participants are looking for employment even though the government has no job vacancies available. The researchers opted for the perceptions on alleviating poverty.

Study findings

The study focused on one main research question which sought to understand the participants' perceptions on poverty.

Thematic analysis of findings

Table 2: Table presenting the study themes

Theme & Subtheme No.	Theme Description
1.	Poverty associated with diseases
2.	Poverty associated with a phenomenon of Divorce
3.	Lack of Job Opportunities
4.	Poverty associated with homelessness
5.	Poverty and inequalities



Poverty is understood as lack in an individual's socio-economic capability. Its manifestations include factors such as income, access to basic services, access to assets, information and social networks. This broad approach to poverty allows for engagement with the reality of poverty and the combination of work done to deal with it. Ministers agreed that poverty is an enemy to resources and draws the most attention. The majority of people have nothing in life because they are impoverished due to a severe lack of job opportunities and sustaining projects to prevent dire poverty. Poverty's primary problem, according to ministers of the MCSA, is lack of disposable income, its consequences are high rates of prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse. Poverty contributes to the decline of the country's economy.

Church stewards stressed that poverty is a serious concern in the Alice Region and Nkonkobe Local Municipality Area in particular; moreover, this is where half of the population live without employment, hence their dire poverty. One of the stewards stated that factors that act as barriers to poverty alleviation in the area are lack of job opportunities that lead to the high rate of crime and corruption. They also agreed that poverty is the 'mother' of crime and corruption; its consequences are inequality and violation of human rights of the poor people by the rich and affluent circles in society. Although some people engaged in corruption come from poor backgrounds, the majority hail from more economically viable families.

Congregants stated that poverty is a challenge for people in both the rural and urban areas. They also agreed that poverty caused division amongst people, and also between friends and families, as it causes inequality amongst people.

Poverty associated with diseases

Poverty has adverse consequences on health through different ways. The most observable issue is that poor people do not have material resources such as money necessary to pay for necessary health care. Furthermore, they can neither afford disease prevention nor doctors and medicine costs once the disease has appeared. Hence, poor people are more likely to be unhealthy than rich people (Sala-i-Martins, 2002: 2). Most respondents agreed that the majority of diseases are caused by poverty, as they stated that many HIV/AIDS positive people are poor, and some contracted the virus due to prostitution. Additionally, poor people are more likely to live in massively overcrowded areas or in distant rural areas without access to clean water and sanitation. Thus, they have a larger propensity towards diarrhoea, cholera or typhoid fever (Sala-i-Martins, 2002: 3). The majority of people who stay in rural areas have no clean water in their areas and make use of unhygienic water from dams.

Wojcicki (2002: 275) stresses that poor young girls are more likely to be unable to refuse sex with rich, powerful men, which makes them to be at greater risk of venereal diseases or AIDS. Another challenge for poor young girls that live in these areas is that of peer pressure because they see others' material possessions and have relationships with old rich men who pay for these. Unfortunately for them, some of these men are HIV/AIDS positive. The next theme discussed below is *poverty and divorce*.

Poverty associated with a phenomenon of Divorce

The majority of poor people in the study area are divorcees because women do not want to face the challenge of poverty by remaining with poor partners. Most of them want to maintain high standards, but their problem is that their efforts do not meet the high standards. Lichter, Roempke and Brow (2003: 1) argue that the divorce rate has stabilised among the middle class but is increasing among the poor, thereby explaining why many separated fathers pay little or no child support. In addition, financial hardship is a major cause of family breakdown. Low-income parents are more likely than others to break up and remain poor after the split (Lichter, Roempke & Brow, 2003: 1).



Divorce affects not only the adults who make this choice, but the children as well. Children's emotional and psychological responses to divorce depend on their age. In most cases, children are often confused by the divorce and are mostly traumatised by it (Family and Marriage Society, 2009: 18). Moreover, stable marriages have an optimistic effect on the quality of family life. Nonetheless, certain cultural and religious practices lead to marriage being an oppressive institution (Popenoe, 1996: 23a). Rural African women are sometimes treated like slaves responsible for all the domestic work in a highly patriarchal system. This is viewed as a *bona fide* part of African culture.

Lack of job opportunities

Unemployment and under-employment lie at the base of poverty. For the poor, labour is often the only thing they can be involved in to improve their well-being. Therefore, creation of productive employment opportunities is essential for achieving poverty reduction and sustainable economic and social development. It is crucial to provide decent jobs that both secure income and empowerment for the poor, especially women and younger people (Osmani, 2003: 4). The majority of people in the study area are unemployed; therefore, this increases poverty rates. In the face of fewer job opportunities, people become poorer.

Economic growth can, hypothetically, bring a high rate of expansion of productive and remunerative employment, which can lead to a needed reduction in poverty. However, the contribution of the growth process to poverty reduction does not depend only on the rate of economic growth, but also on the ability of the poor to respond to the increasing demand for labour in more productive categories of employment (Khan, 2007: 16). Given the importance of employment for poverty reduction, job-creation should occupy a central place in national poverty reduction strategies. Many employment strategies are often related to agricultural and rural development and include using labour-intensive agricultural technologies, developing small and medium-size enterprises and promoting micro-projects in rural areas. Many strategies promote self-employment, farm employment in rural areas, targeted employment interventions, micro-finance and credit as means of employment generation, skills-formation and training (Burroughs & Stockwell, 1998: 22).

Poverty associated with homelessness

The majority of people in the Alice region live in mud shacks in informal settlements and others do not have access to standard shelters because of their extremely poor status. Some children at Keiskammahoek and Fort Beaufort stay in orphanages supported by churches, and the MCSA in the Keiskammahoek Circuit provides them with food, clothes, toiletries and blankets. Homelessness has particularly adverse effects on children and youth, namely: hunger, poor physical and mental health and missed educational opportunities (Rafferty, 1991: 1170). The Discussion Document (2008: 13) stresses that access to assets, particularly housing, land and capital, including public infrastructure, improve economic and social security and provides the basis for economic engagement in the longer run.

Within the epistemological context of a post-foundationalism epistemology, the dimension of spirituality is a comprehensive opinion of being and the meta-theoretical input of non-theological disciplines in this regard (Van den Berg, 2008:121) also stated that this could make a meaningful contribution to the enormous task of handling pastoral encounters within the plight of the poor. To introduce one exciting possibility, understanding of spirituality could approach the essence of poverty-stricken sufferers in terms of their own context. Van den Berg (2008:126) confirms that we need to prevent a kind of spiritual pastoral care that fixates on comfort and compassion because it only offers 'pie in the sky' relief. Moreover, an understanding of spirituality would serve to open up dimensions of poverty not previously reckoned with in pastoral care. In terms of such an understanding, the researcher champions empowerment, psychological dimensions of poverty and theology of poverty, amongst other aspects of the situation.



Poverty and inequality

In some villages, those people who do not own material possessions are not allowed to say anything in societal meetings. Those who earn better incomes are the ones who are recognised by the inhabitants. Inequality shows how resources are disseminated across the whole society. This gives a picture of the difference between average income and what poor and rich people earn and are recognised by through what they earn.

Wealth is not the same as income. There are many examples of wealthy individuals living in homes that have, over time, appreciated hugely in value, but whose incomes are dramatically lower than their wealth suggests. Many individuals with high incomes consume all they earn and may even borrow heavily to support lavish lifestyles, and their wealth may actually be very low (Schor, 2011: 88).

The practical consequence of this option for the poor is that through their conscientization efforts, churches must seek to arouse and mobilize the poor and oppressed to take a firm stand against poverty, oppression and suffering and join the God of the Exodus and of Jesus the Christ (the liberator) to become instruments of their own liberation (Martey, 1993:98). According to Nolan, the interesting thing about the Exodus story is that the poor and oppressed, on their part, must fight for their own cause. He clarifies the point as follows: "The option for the poor is almost thought of as a commitment which the non-poor have to make to the cause of those who are oppressed. But what is far more fundamental in the Bible is the option of the poor for their own cause" (Nolan, 1985:192).

Boff and Pixley (1989:xi) have argued that, "People are divided by the stand they take on poverty." These words tempt one to apply this to theologians and their theological addresses, which can also be divided by the stand they take on poverty. In the South African context, theologians must use theology to complement and stand alongside the poor. In theological work and ministry, there are no options but to side with the poor of the world. It is generally agreed that God is on the side of the poor, and the researcher subscribes to that view. Our theology and our reflections must also adopt the preferential option for the poor, which is, in fact, biblical. Therefore, the church and its theology must also concretely express this option for the poor. If God is unambiguously on the side of the poor, can the church afford to be on a different side? Can our theological address afford to ignore the realities experienced by the poor? Can the church afford to ignore the agency of the poor? Thus, theological reflection and pastoral actions cannot afford to proceed unchallenged with their usual apathy towards the socio-economic, political conditions and the plight of the poor. The researcher agrees with Pattison (1988:83) when he stresses that pastoral care has a disregard of social and political dimensions. He added that pastoral care which precedes the social and political proportions of human existence should seriously be biased towards the poor (Pattison, 1988:103).

Discussion of the findings

The findings reveal that poverty is caused by high unemployment rates and lack of training to prevent poverty. The consequences of poverty are diseases and divorce. Participants also agreed that poverty breaks friendships, families and communities. Although congregation members came up with the view that poverty divides families and friends, it also causes inequality, hunger and homeless people. Furthermore, the ministers identified lack of training and education as factors as key barriers towards alleviating poverty in the Alice Region resulting in rapid economic decline and lack of employment in this area. Stewards pointed out that young single mothers are faced with poverty and have challenges of bringing up their children without even the most basic income which would allow them to buy the most basic goods to meet subsistence needs.



There is a phenomenon where people become entrenched in poverty due to a number of different factors. Family experience, lack of education, limited access to employment and health care all contribute to this destructive progression. Poverty may be borne in generations and set up people in future generations to continue to live this way. Without outside intervention to give people necessary access to education and employment, the cycle may continue for generations.

With regard to addiction, there is evidence to suggest that those in the cycle of poverty are addicted to various substances. They have more difficulty in breaking the substance abuse cycle and returning to a peaceful life than those who are not poor. Additionally, if parents suffer from addiction to drugs or alcohol, their children may have a higher risk to replicate this condition and state of existence.

The higher standard of living of people living in urban areas as compared to those in rural areas, has dissuaded people from focusing on employment in agriculture in small farming for food security threat alleviation. The majority of people have a piece of land to work on but do not cultivate it for their own food security. Coercion was also found to be impacting on those who left school before completing Grade 12; this was due to their poor understanding of natural functions of the body, like menstruation, and were laughed at by their fellow learners when menstruating. Others left school because they did not have a school uniform and access to needed textbooks. The economic hardship in some families has resulted in the prevalent high rates of prostitution, crime and corruption.

Summary

Research on the MCSA in the Grahamstown district in the Alice region, was conducted in order to determine the realities of poverty alleviation because poverty affects and infects people, regardless of their social standing. Poverty is caused by a number of factors such as large families without income, cultural influences and a lack of job opportunities in a country with an unemployment rate of about 30 percent. Perceptions, and other factors that act as barriers to poverty alleviation and also needed support mechanisms should be addressed. People should be encouraged to alleviate poverty and this can be achieved if they are empowered economically. This will support them in endeavours not be exploited by the rich in society who take advantage of their state of poverty. Religious Ministers should be responsible enough to know how to try to help people to meet the challenges of alleviating poverty in the Nkonkobe Local Municipality and Alice Region and should be especially knowledgeable on projects that attack poverty. People face significant challenges when they are poor. Some of the challenges include: inequality, homelessness, divorce, diseases and young, single, drunken parents. Generally, poor people lack support from government sectors and also lack social, financial and emotional support from their fellow communities. The most painful experience is when they do not get support from the church; the MCSA, however, restores their hope by supporting them. The Methodist Church has a great responsibility to train people to alleviate poverty. Another responsibility of the Methodist Church is to encourage young people and teach them to appreciate the value of education.

Recommendations

Further research is necessary to investigate why ministers, stewards and congregation members report difficulties in efforts aimed at alleviating poverty.

- There is need for the MCSA to create a committee that will determine structures for sustaining projects for poverty alleviation so as to give an account of finance utilization.
- The MCSA should take into account all the special conditions that are associated with poverty alleviation. The church should also be concerned about people who are



impoverished and for example who have no accommodation, food and clothes, and support them in their actual day-to-day living conditions.

- MCSA, the Department of Social Development, NGOs and the Department of Health should work together to strategize on fighting against the curse of poverty in the Alice Region. There is also a need for collaborative efforts by different stakeholders to strategize on this important fight.

The Methodist Church should strive to develop a poverty eradication policy and integrate it into its existing policies. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa should integrate appropriate policy formulation so that the fight against poverty is established within a carefully crafted MCSA policy.

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