

“You need to change the whole person” African Initiated Churches and Sustainable Development in South Africa

The chapter reflects on notions of development and sustainability from the perspective of African Initiated Churches themselves. It explores how this situated knowledge shapes the churches’ development priorities and how they relate to dominant western notions of sustainable development as ecologically sustainable development. Moreover, it investigates the interrelation between spirituality and sustainable development, particularly with respect to the churches’ holistic and spiritual world views. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the potential of African Initiated Churches as partners of international cooperation for sustainable development. It materializes that the specific potential of these churches lies in cultural sustainability, a contextual, cultural embeddedness that enables long-lasting change.¹

1 This contribution draws on the research project “Are African Initiated Churches adequate partners for future development cooperation?” at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The project was commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, whose financial support is gratefully acknowledged. A comprehensive overview of the project’s results is provided in Öhlmann et al. (2016).

Introduction

African Initiated Churches² in South Africa are increasingly active in development activities. They provide counselling and mediate intra-family conflicts, they offer savings groups and business trainings and they build schools and provide university scholarships (Öhlmann, Frost and Gräb 2016). However, unlike many Mission Churches they have not been recognized as relevant actors by international development cooperation. While it has been acknowledged in the literature that many of these churches provide coping mechanisms in adverse environments, support in social transformation and social capital, little attention has been paid to their potential as agents of development and most notably of sustainable development.

Sustainable development, as coined in the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and on Development, refers to “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987: 43). The quintessence of the report was that economic and social development needs to take into account the ecological framework they operate in and its limitations. Consequently, in current development discourses, sustainable development is often used to describe a mode of development that takes

2 We use the term African *Initiated* Churches to denote all churches founded by Africans, in Africa (Turner 1967) and without direct links to “Missionary ‘Godfathers’” (Pobee and Ositelu 1998:55). This includes those churches traditionally called independent churches, such as Zionist, Apostolic and Ethiopian Churches, as well as Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches. Both of these groups, which are often separated in the literature, fall under the definition of African *initiated* as outlined above. We subsume them because, with very few exceptions, they are not yet partners of international development agencies unlike many Mission Churches. Another common and distinctive feature is the significance of the spiritual in their cosmology, be it the Holy Spirit, spiritual forces or healing (Anderson 2000). Moreover, the differentiation is not always clear. Some churches could be qualified as belonging to one category as well as belonging to the other. The South African Council of African Instituted Churches, for example, includes churches that show characteristics of Charismatics and those that show characteristics of Zionists/Apostolics/Ethiopians. Lastly, even though Zionists/Apostolics/Ethiopians and Charismatics are usually differentiated in the literature, this separation is questionable. A small Zionist church with few basic structures, for example, might have more in common with a Charismatic church of similar size than with the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) which has several million of members. The ZCC, in turn, might have more in common in terms of its structure with other transnational churches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) than with a small Zionist church. Hence, notwithstanding the substantial heterogeneity, we subsume these churches under the umbrella of African Initiated Churches. For a comprehensive outline, see Öhlmann, Gräb and Frost (2020).

into account ecological considerations and limitations of natural resources. This link between development and ecological sustainability is one of the pivotal points in the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015) with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Jüttner 2016).

In more general terms, sustainability refers to “the ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level” (Oxford Dictionary 2017). Sustainable development interventions, hence, are such development programs or projects that produce sustained i.e. lasting changes beyond any given project lifetime. Ecological sustainability is a special case of sustainability: lasting change can only be generated if long-term ecological limitations are respected. Both notions have in common that they require a transformation of mind sets, values and knowledge. Ecological sustainability depends on a culture of sustainable use of natural resources. Similarly, the broader notion of sustainability depends on changes in people’s consciousness, which result in different actions.

A fundamental prerequisite for such transformation is the cultural and social embeddedness (Granovetter 1985) of any development activities. Development can only become sustainable if it is locally grounded, contextually relevant and makes reference to local cultural knowledge systems. This embeddedness in local cultural frameworks (essentially including all forms of religious knowledge), which produces continuously maintained processes of change, is cultural sustainability.³

This chapter aims to investigate the potential of African Initiated Churches as agents of sustainable development in relation to the semantic field of sustainability, outlined above, in its ecological, social, economic and cultural dimensions. It explores how their situated religious knowledge shapes the churches’ development priorities and how they relate to notions of sustainability and development. It emerges that sustainable development has to be seen in the context of the churches’ wider transformation agenda, a key feature of which is a strong interrelatedness of spirituality, situated religious knowledge and development. We sketch elements of this transformation agenda and subsequently outline its *modus operandi* at various levels: first, the transformation of individual lives through healing and within a contextually relevant cosmology; second, the values and modes of social interaction they promote; and third, how at an institutional level the churches themselves are agents of transformation in their communities in other words, actors of sustainable development. The chapter concludes

3 For an overview of the different applications of the term in the literature, see Soini and Birkeland (2014) <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748907633-305>, am 30.06.2024, 08:27:41

with an exploration of the potential of African Initiated Churches as partners of international development agencies for sustainable development.

We draw on interviews and focus group workshops with African Initiated Churches' leaders conducted by the authors in northern South Africa. Fourteen church leaders were interviewed individually and 6 focus workshops were conducted, attended by between 3 and 20 church leaders from different areas. Although the sample of participating churches is not representative in a statistical sense, it covers both urban and rural contexts of two South African provinces, Gauteng and Limpopo. Furthermore, the sample was chosen to be as heterogeneous as possible in terms of size and categories of the churches (such as international Pentecostal-Charismatic, local Pentecostal-Charismatic, Zionist, Apostolic, Ethiopian).

Notions of sustainability: from sustainable development to transformation of life

When investigating development priorities of African Initiated Churches, it emerged that issues related to ecological sustainability play a marginal role. Participating church leaders were presented with five program areas of German development cooperation in South Africa and asked to select the one they considered most important. Charts 1 and 2 show the church leaders' valuation of the program areas in individual interviews and focus group workshops, respectively. Climate change was consequently ranked last not once being named most important in individual church leader interviews.⁴

Moreover, when asked about their opinion on what constituted the major problems in people's lives, a long list of issues emerged, from unemployment and teenage pregnancies to the need for theological education (cf. chart 3). However, not a single item was mentioned relating to ecological sustainability or broader environmental issues. Not even day to day issues, such as rubbish in the streets, overgrazing of fields or lack of rainfall, appear on the list.

4 It was emphasized by the research team in the beginning of the interviews and discussions that the research is entirely unrelated to possible funding by development agencies. Nonetheless, already due to the theme of the research, it might still be the case that the respondents' valuation was influenced by a certain degree of latent expectation to participate in future projects on the respective program area. In this case, participation in basic entrepreneurial skills training might seem more attractive than participation in climate change projects. However, it seems unlikely that this was a major determinant of the responses.

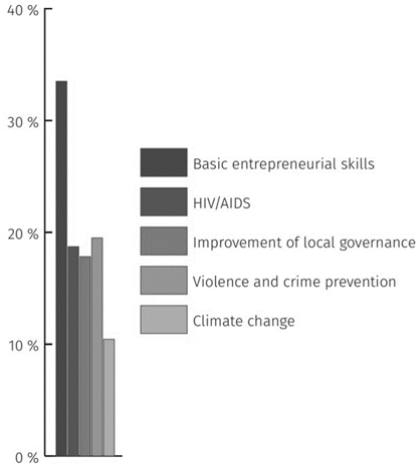


Chart 1: Percentage of church leaders considering the respective area most important (multiple selections possible; average across four focus group workshops). Source: Öhlmann et al. (2016)

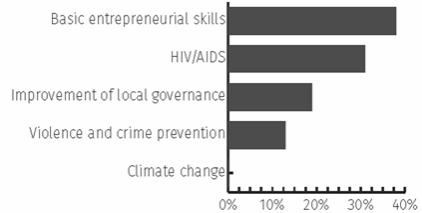


Chart 2: Percentage of individual church leaders who consider the respective area most important (multiple selections possible; data from 14 individual interviews). Source: Öhlmann et al. (2016)

In only one of the interviews did a church leader elaborate on environmental activities, the removal of waste in the surroundings of the church:

“Yes, this one I am doing it and we call it ‘environmental hygiene and personal hygiene’ to help other people more especially to clean up at the places, because they will bring dirty things and start to burn them at the road there. I was calling my neighbors and I said I am going to make something like a board and put it here that says ‘keep [the village] clean’ and they were laughing at me.” (Interview 2016/S/03)⁵

It seems that this kind of environmental initiative was not considered very important by the rural community the church was located in. The responses of African Initiated Church leaders yield a similar result. Notions of ecological sustainability or even environmental issues do not seem to feature prominently on their agenda. Some voices are even skeptical:

“And then, climate change I do not agree with. [...] The world is sinful my sister. God, when people repent, He will bring rain, so no government in the world can change the climate, no one; no government can change the climate, they can’t. Even the energy, these things that they use, they come from God [...] God spoke from the book of Chronicles, if the people who are called by my name can just repent, I

5 In the following, some interviewees are listed by (their preferred) name and some anonymously. This is done in accordance with the interviewees’ preferences.⁴¹

will give them rain. It is only God who can change [the] climate. [...] With this one, climate change and energy, it belongs to God, it doesn't belong any other person. It belongs to God. There is no science or anything that can prove otherwise, this is from God, we leave it to God. Repent and it will rain on us." (Interview Sello Simon Rasemana, 2016)

While ecological sustainability seems to play a subordinate role for many African Initiated Churches in South Africa, it is worthwhile scrutinizing their potential for sustainability in its broader sense, related to lasting change. Pastor Elijah Daramola, Coordinator of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Southern Africa, highlighted that it is precisely this type of sustainability that is pivotal in the development work of his church: "You need to change the whole person" (Interview Elijah Daramola, 2016). He explained that it is not sufficient to provide a person with skills in the framework of development interventions, "because it will be a waste of time and money if you train people without their lives being changed" (Interview Elijah Daramola, 2016). He further elaborated on this point:

"Our goal must be made clear. Is it in just impacting people and leave them living anyhow? Or is it impacting people and mak[ing] live peaceful? If we have this agreement, we will flow together. But otherwise work will not be a blessing to others." (Interview Elijah Daramola, 2016)

If the acquisition of a technical skill was the only change a development activity produced in a person, one would not know what she/he used this skill for. Ideally the person would use it for the communal good or at least individual improvement, but the skill might also go unused or, in extreme cases, even be used for destructive purposes. Pastor Daramola illustrated this with the example of a person trained in engineering who used his/her skills for building weapons. The sustained transformation of people's lives is the recurring and central motif in the interview: "The best thing you can give is Christ. Wherever they go afterwards they can continue with Christ. [...] That is why their lives will be transformed. Training alone is not enough."

Another church leader points to transformation of life as the major challenge:

Interview question: “What are the major needs in people’s life?”

Response: “The major need... the people’s life needs to be transformed. People’s life needs to be salvaged; people’s life needs to be educated. People are ignorant, some people are on the other side of life, they need to be brought to the light. It takes a lot of movement to activate and actualize that. People need to know about Christ more and I think that is the fundamental beginning of salvation.” (Interview 2016/S/05)

This transformation of life is interwoven with the concepts of salvation and deliverance.

Interview question: “What do people need in their lives today?”

Response: “They need healing, they need deliverance. In this area people need deliverance a lot.” (Interview 2016/S/04)

Transformation of life and notions of salvation seem to mutually superimpose each other. It is precisely this intersection of the spiritual and the material that breaks the ground for lasting change and cultural sustainability. By transforming people’s lives in their material and immaterial, i.e. spiritual, dimensions African Initiated Churches provide the basis for sustainable development.

Elements of transformation

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, people face numerous adversities. Physical violence, poverty and death are personal realities in a person’s everyday life. In this context, religious communities are important sources of psychosocial support. Due to their contextual world view and the large and growing number of their adherents, this is particularly true for African Initiated Churches. Through various strategies, they enable their members to deal with the manifold challenges experienced in their lives. By providing “spiritual endurance” (Cilliers and Wepener 2007) they increase individuals’ and communities’ resilience against adverse shocks.

Due to the rapid political, social and economic changes taking place in South Africa, social structures transform and identities are re-shaped. Insecurity and psychosocial crises emerge (Oosthuizen 1988). In his study on witchcraft in post-1994 South Africa, Ashforth (1998, 507) describes how these transformative processes lead to an increase in the belief in and fear of witchcraft in peri-urban township contexts and diagnoses a general “spiritual insecurity”. It is in this framework of insecurity that African Initiated

Churches play an important role. They are moderators of social change in the sense that they enable people to deal with the fundamental transformations of their environment and with perceived negative forces (Masondo 2013).

Various studies have pointed out the affirmation of identity and self-worth to which African Initiated Churches contribute (inter alia Masondo 2013; 2014; Bompani 2010). Masondo (2014: 2) explains:

“The African indigenous churches exemplify the African struggle for self-identification and self-realization. During the apartheid era, grown-up African men were treated as overgrown children by their white employers. It was only within the context of the church where they rose to the position of prominence and respectability.”

More than 20 years after the end of Apartheid black people in South Africa continue to experience what Linda Thomas terms “systemic dehumanization” (Thomas 1997:23), a continuing marginalization because of the persistent adverse social and economic structures they find themselves in. Lack of economic opportunities, social exclusion, a deficient educational system, high prevalence of violence and crime and lack of basic services continue to be the surrounding environment of a large part of the South African population (Herbst and Mills 2015). Hence, Masondo’s statement (ibid.) possesses validity even for the post-Apartheid era.

The comprehensive transformation of individual and communal lives fostered by African Initiated Churches does not exhaust itself in a problem-solving strategy. Once the person is liberated from their problems, they acquire the ability to shape their own life. Liberating in this context does not mean that all challenges, hardships and problems are solved and gone, but rather that they no longer define and control the possibilities and development of the individual. Through the stabilization, believers gain the ability and the motivation to transform their lives, a process that is fostered and promoted by African Initiated Churches. Schlemmer (2008: 80) calls this “spiritual capital”: “What their faith does give them is confidence that they can succeed—in other words abundant spiritual capital”. Russell Toohey, pastor of a Pentecostal-Charismatic Church interviewed by Meyer describes this as:

“redemption and lift, which says that as people are redeemed there is a lift in their social standing [and] their lives stabilize. They are not into boozing so much, and so they got much more money with which to develop their homes, and to educate their children.” (Meyer 2004: 284)

It is important to note that a separation between stabilization (dealing with one’s challenges or eliminating the negative) and transformation (actively changing one’s life or adding the positive) is only conceptual. In fact, they are one transformative process expressing itself in stabilization and improvement. Stabilization is already part of the long-term positive transformative process, which has different shapes and structures in different churches, communities and individuals. Moreover, the process is indefinite. In the view of the churches, one does not reach a point where the transformation is complete. As one member of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and chairperson of this church’s local business owner forum describes:

“Where I am now, I never went to school, meaning I only passed matric, but in me there was that thing, saying you are an entrepreneur. You are an entrepreneur. You have something inside you which can lead the world, which can help the world. Try to take that thing out, so that people can see that. So the only way to get that thing, so that I can take it to the world, was through the spirit which was guiding me. [...] So, with the church, the church which was guiding me. [...] ZCC was the one which I chose, because of the leader, the one who is saying he always encourages us to follow your dreams. He is saying you must follow these dreams, I will guide you. I will teach you. [...] It’s a journey. That’s why I am saying some went inside the church hoping to get things easy. When they see me like this, they say, ‘tomorrow I am going to church, I wanna be like this guy.’ No, no, no, something else. This is a journey.” (Interview 2015/S/01)

Closely related with the transformation of life is the notion of entrepreneurship, mentioned by this interviewee, which is also one focal point of the literature on African Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches. The transformation of life has strong material components. Salvation, which is “here and now” (Anderson 2000: 48), includes the absence of poverty (Heuser 2013). As shown in charts 1 and 2, the area of basic entrepreneurial skills was consistently ranked as the highest priority both in individual interviews and focus group discussions. This is in line with the results of the large-scale research project on Pentecostalism in South Africa reported on by Schlemmer (2008), whose central conclusion was that the greatest potential of Pentecostalism is entrepreneurship. Our own results confirm that this does not only extend to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, but to African Initiated Churches in general.

Engaging transformation

Healing and world view: transforming the individual

The manifold processes associated with overcoming one's problems and dealing with insecurities are commonly described as a process of healing. Far from only referring to a medical sense, healing can be understood as a process to overcome adversities, be they spiritual, material or social—in short, all aspects that can affect the quality of life in a negative way (Schoffeleers 1991; Pretorius 2004). While the specific rituals and activities differ from one church to another (often substantially), healing plays an important role in most African Initiated Churches in South Africa. When asked to describe their churches and why people come to the church, 5 out of 14 church leaders explicitly referred to healing or transformation of people's lives as central feature of their church. Moreover there is a large consensus in the literature that the need for healing is one of the major reasons to join an African Initiated Church (Schoffeleers 1991; Cross, Oosthuizen, and Clark 1993; Thomas 1997; Pretorius 2004; Schlemmer 2008; Bompani 2010).

The churches' healing activities possess high contextual relevance, since they are embedded in an African spiritual cosmology (Ashforth 1998; Pretorius 2004). In this world view, material, social and spiritual spheres are not separated, but constitute layers of the same reality. They are mutually dependent and in constant interaction. Positive and negative spiritual forces, in many cases ancestors and, most importantly, the Holy Spirit are seen to influence social interaction and the physical world. Healing, belief in witchcraft and spirits and divine material blessings all have to be seen against this background.

Some scholars consider this world view to be problematic and as a hindrance to development in all its social, economic and ecological aspects (for example: Gifford 2015; Ndhlovu 2015). The spiritual world view proliferated by the churches, this literature argues, fosters fear and passivity. Because spiritual forces are supposedly seen as determining one's life, trying to improve it actively is futile. Moreover, the belief in negative spiritual forces might even lead to physical violence against those accused of spiritual evil acts, exemplified in the killing of "witches".

However, it should be emphasized that the spiritual world constitutes part of the reality of many people on the African continent, regardless of their religious affiliation. The belief in positive and negative spiritual forces

—easily dismissed as superstition from a western perspective—plays an important role in the lives of many Africans (Ashforth 1998). Therefore it needs to be taken seriously. It is explicitly because African Initiated Churches do not reject this set of beliefs—as opposed to Mission Churches—that they reach so many people, that their support is relevant to their members and that they are able to contribute to the transformation of people’s lives. Bompani (2010: 309) points out:

“[T]hese churches [...] take the negative forces within African cosmology seriously by responding to real problems as perceived [...], namely witchcraft, sorcery, and evil spirits, understanding that it is acceptable to interpret socio-economic hardships and deprivation in contemporary society within the context of adverse cosmic forces. The idea that AICs are considered experts in granting people protection and fortification against the powers of evil accounts to a large degree for their popularity and growth.”

Not all African Initiated Churches subscribe to every single element of spiritual cosmology, nor do they relate to it in the same way. They rather incorporate this general world view in their belief systems as a form of religious knowledge production. Far from producing passivity and fear, African Initiated Churches enable their members to deal with any negative spiritual forces (Oosthuizen 1988). In the framework of comprehensive healing, the churches empower believers to solve their spiritual, material and social problems through spiritual, material and social means.

Ethics and social capital: transforming the environment

The holistic transformation of life in African Initiated Churches regularly finds its expression, inter alia, in a specific moral code. This moral code implies, first, the prohibition of violence, crime and drug consume. Second, it includes the prohibition of behavior and aspects seen as detrimental to a good life, including tobacco and alcohol consume, gambling, parties as well as (in some churches) the consumption of pork. The third aspect refers to strict sexual morals (Pretorius 2004; Bompani 2010). However, this moral code is not only prohibitive. Pretorius’ (2004) study shows that African Initiated Churches’ ethics feature positive imperatives for social interaction as well. Love, compassion, mutual support, respect, adherence to certain biblical commandments regarding social interaction (inter alia Exodus 20,3–17; Romans 13,1–8; Galatians 5,22; Ephesians 4,17), honesty and peacefulness were named as most important values.

This has a substantial impact on social interaction in various realms. African Initiated Churches promote peacefulness and nonviolence in the communities (Heuser 2003). Bompani (2008) makes the point that they foster values of good citizenship. This is further illustrated by the 2016 Easter Sermon of influential ZCC Bishop B.E. Lekganyane, calling on people to participate in the upcoming municipal elections:

“Masione [Zionists], later in the year, you will be expected to go to the polls for local government elections. [...] Be in a state of readiness. Make sure you are registered to vote in your area. Prepare yourselves to go elect your local leaders who will represent your aspirations. Even those who will be asking your vote should remember that leadership is about service to the community.” (Lekganyane, 27 March 2016)

The ethics of African Initiated Churches also have direct effects on interpersonal relationships. Schlemmer (2008) reports that many church members stating their personal relations had improved since they joined an African Initiated Church, not least because their own behavior had changed. They were more balanced, more patient and more tolerant than before. Even though their take on gender issues is generally conservative, it has to be noted that African Initiated Churches foster mutual respect in family and gender relations. This can lead to reduced intra-family conflicts and domestic violence (Pretorius 2004). Nearly all churches interviewed in the authors’ study offer counselling for marriage and family problems. The following example from a ZCC member shows how African Initiated Churches can contribute to the solution of conflicts:

“I was having anger. Why? Because my parents were not telling me about my father. That anger was there because my mother refused to disclose what was happening between her and my father. That anger was just on me. It was not easy for me. There are these social problems that cause depression and anger. So, to guide you, to say, you must leave this and do this, that’s where the church has taken a stand and said, you cannot deal with anger by drinking this [alcohol]. [...] In order to deal with that anger you must get your background. [...] And that’s where sometimes, spiritually, you need someone who can guide you, lead you to your culture. So that’s where the church plays a role. [...] Just after you get your answers, you must forget about your past. This is where I am now. I am staying with my mother and sisters and we are happy. [...] It helps you not to have a grudge.” (Interview 2015/S/01)

African Initiated Churches are an important source of social capital⁶. Several studies show that mutual support plays an important role (Cross, Oosthuizen, and Clark 1993; Masondo 2013; Schlemmer 2008). Nearly every congregation fosters a culture of visiting sick people and praying for them (Öhlmann et al. 2016). Many churches have so-called burial societies to save money for families who cannot afford a decent burial. Additionally, informal savings groups flourish in African Initiated Churches and prove the high level of mutual trust. These activities are usually intertwined with joint spiritual activities like worship or prayer. Moreover, members provide each other with practical help and useful information, for example about economic opportunities or basic issues such as housing (Cross, Oosthuizen, and Clark 1993; Schlemmer 2008).

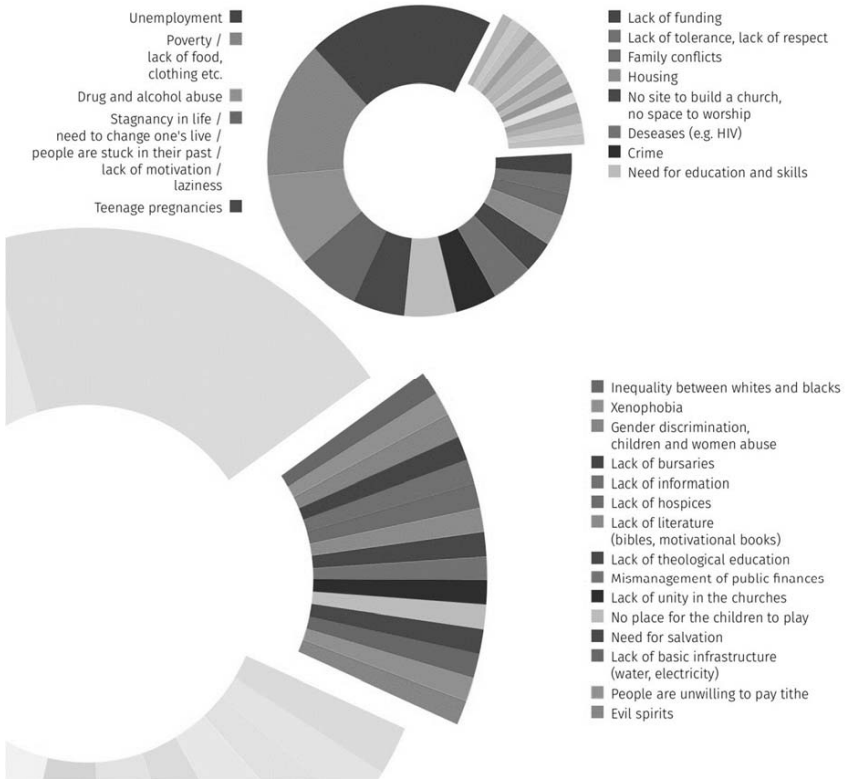
Transformation in action

At the institutional level, African Initiated Churches prove to be surprisingly active in development-related activities (cf. the more comprehensive description in Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2016). The church leaders interviewed by the authors were asked to name the major problems in people’s lives. Chart 3 shows all items mentioned during the individual interviews and/or workshops. With unemployment and poverty manifesting themselves in the lack of basic goods such as food and clothes, the interviewees mainly pointed out material needs. But also social problems like alcohol and

6 We refer to social capital as defined by Bourdieu (1986: 248) as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition or in other words to membership to a group.”

drug abuse or teenage pregnancies are mentioned along with specifically spiritual problems such as stagnancy in life and the need for healing.

Chart 3: What are the major problems in people’s lives? Responses from focus group workshops and individual interviews. Source: Öhlmann et al. (2016)



Consequently, the answers given to the question “How does your church support the community?” show that African Initiated Churches do not only see peoples’ problems but are very active in different areas to improve the lives of their members and the wider community. Even though often on a small scale and in an informal way, nearly all surveyed churches run support and development activities. Even smaller and poorer churches collect food, clothing and/or money for school fees for people in need—often regardless of their membership in the congregation. Additionally, health-related activities such as raising awareness on HIV/AIDS, and pastoral care for affected persons and their families rank high on African Initiated Churches’

agendas. Many of them offer scholarships for school children and students on a regular basis, the coverage ranging from providing support to individual members to large projects like the ZCC’s scholarship program reaching some 300 students with a budget of over €200,000 per year. Larger African Initiated Churches often run their own crèches, schools or skills training centers. In general, there is a strong emphasis on education and training with a clear focus on entrepreneurial skills (as evident from charts 1 and 2). Five out of 14 church leaders underlined the need for education and two of them suggested adding education, especially for young children and teenagers, to the five areas presented. Their reasoning was that education, like skills training, is a prerequisite enabling people to improve their lives sustainably and out of their own power. Education and (entrepreneurial) skills enable people to become self-sustainable—to become agents of their own transformation. One interviewee emphasized this: “Don’t give me a fish, teach me how to fish” (Workshop Minutes 2016/S/02). African Initiated Churches’ engagement in this area also shows that they directly target the major problems identified: unemployment and poverty (cf. chart 3). In many ways, church leaders noted, their work is similar to that of non-religious NGOs: “We are all aiming at achieving the same thing, which is human development. The difference could be the platform from which we are standing; we are doing it as a church” (Interview Don Makumbani, 2016). Hence, on the one hand, the development-related activities are seen in close relation to those of NGOs. On the other hand, the churches’ activities are considered as having an additional, distinctive dimension: the spiritual. It is precisely this dimension that provides added value to the activities otherwise similar to the programs of non-religious development actors. As Bishop Elias Mashabela, a church leader from South Africa, elaborated:

“The NGOs are taking care of people but they do not take care of the spiritual part of the human being. So we are taking care of the people, [...] but we go beyond. We also look at the spiritual well-being of the persons [...]. We run similar programs, but we do more by adding the spiritual level.” (Interview Elias Mashabela, 2016)

Many church leaders underlined the importance of providing both spiritual and material support. In fact spiritual activities like Sunday Schools, religious programs on local radio stations, prayer or giving services for free were named together with development activities as their support given to the community. Moreover, the two areas are also seen to be closely intertwined at an institutional level. As one church leader put it, “You cannot teach the Word to an empty stomach” (Interview 2016/S/06). Pastor Holymike, another South African church leader, referred to John 13:35

where Jesus tells the disciples that they will be recognized by others through the fact that they love each other and explained:

“And of course love is not just love. Love has to be accompanied by actions. So, I think there is an interaction from what we preach to what we do. Because what we do is what we are preaching, yes: love, hope.” (Interview Holymike, 2016)

Development-relevant activities (in a secular sense) and spiritual activities are mutually complementary and strongly interrelated. This interrelation is highly important to the church leaders. It stands in contrast to the understanding of many international development organizations, which operate on the basis of a secular distinction between spirituality and development that has been a key feature of international development policy for decades—even of most faith-based development actors.

Hence, this point was further discussed with church leaders in the interviews. One church leader summarized the African Initiated Churches’ holistic approach towards development in his statement: “Spiritual development is part of development. A good life includes spirituality” (Interview Elijah Daramola, 2016). The main argument against such a separation was that people need both sides to lead a good life and for their transformation to be long lasting. However, on a practical level there seems to be room for manoeuvre. Seven out of the 14 interviewees considered such a separation possible. Some welcomed the idea, as it would permit them to reach more people with their development-related activities. However, several church leaders noted that, while the activities do not have to happen at the same time, it is still important to have both. One church leader said, it would be fine if a representative from a development organization came to the church and gave a workshop about a specific topic without performing any prayer, because the church leader could lead the prayer afterwards. The example also points to a practical challenge: many African Initiated Churches do not have facilities aside from the church building itself (if the congregation has one at all) to host their activities. A complete separation would thus be difficult because of spatial restrictions.

Conclusions

A comprehensive cultural, social and economic transformation is at the core of the actions and ideologies of many African Initiated Churches in South Africa. Their activities and beliefs are strongly geared towards the improvement of individual and communal lives in multiple dimensions. Against the background of a holistic vision of the material and spiritual

world as well as human society, their concrete intentions and activities of transformation start at the micro and meso levels of society. They focus on the doable: contributing to changing lives of individuals and (small) communities. They are relevant development actors in their communities, implementing various different activities of different scales. These activities and their development priorities are usually directed toward empowering the individual, for example through education or entrepreneurship and skills training. Coherent with their immediate concept of salvation (“here and now”) they are less concerned with developing larger ideological and political concepts for the transformation of society in general. Based on their faith, their aim is to transform people’s self-understandings, notion of life, attitude to life and life itself. They seek to liberate their members from life’s immediate adversities and to fundamentally affirm their agency and resilience. Hence, it is little surprising that ecological sustainability plays a subordinate role in their development priorities and activities.

This deliverance from life’s adversities is quite the contrary to passiveness and individual withdrawal from the world. It is a fundamental affirmation of this-worldliness, as it enables the person to become the agent in the transformation of his or her life. In this, two points are crucial: first, that African Initiated Churches operate within contextual belief systems of spiritual world views—a dominant form of religious knowledge in many African contexts—and second, that they see the person and the world in a comprehensive way, in their physical, social and spiritual dimensions. The manifold material, social and spiritual hardships experienced can be dealt with through material, social and spiritual means: healing, ethical codes, mutual support and development activities. In all these dimensions, African Initiated Churches operate within a highly contextual framework. Their beliefs, ethics and actions are deeply embedded in contextual social and cultural structures and cosmologies.

Spirituality and development go hand in hand; they are seen as complementary and intertwined. This is also reflected in their activities. Both (non-spiritual) development activities and spiritual activities are seen as contributing to the transformation of life. The African Initiated Churches’ transformation agenda is wider than sustainable development as defined by the SDGs. Where the international development community recognizes that “religion is part of development”, from the perspective of the African Initiated Churches one could respond with “development is part of religion”—i.e. for many of these churches development is only one aspect in a wider transformation agenda. Even though they focus on the micro and meso levels, they work on the transformation of the cultural basis of the

socioeconomic and political factors and thus contribute to the transformation of broader society.

In order to produce lasting changes it is vital that any development intervention affirms the agency of individuals and communities and takes into account their social and cultural embeddedness as a frame of reference (Gräb 2014). Because African Initiated Churches aim to change the whole person and make reference to a contextual spiritual cosmology, their development activities have the potential to be highly sustainable. By comprehensively transforming lives (instead of merely providing skills) they produce lasting impact. Their activities are locally grounded, contextually relevant and operate within accepted cultural and contextual frameworks. Hence, they bear high potential for sustainable development as outlined in the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). What they offer to sustainable development is cultural sustainability.

As agents of culturally sustainable development, African Initiated Churches also bear great potential for ecological sustainability in the long run. Questions of ecological sustainability have a close proximity both to African Initiated Churches' world view and biblical scripture. African Initiated Christianity's spiritual worldview is often cross-fertilized with traditional African religious notions of the overlap of the spiritual and material world. Notions of the sacredness of places and nature resonate well with ecological sustainability. This is also the case for the biblical notion of integrity of creation. While our results indicate that ecological sustainability plays a subordinate role in the churches' concrete development priorities and activities at present, they are vital stakeholders that can contribute to "cultural acceptance [...] to promote the successful implementation of development schemes to reach environmental goals or to improve the quality of life of local people" (Soini and Birkeland 2014) in the future. Due to their ability to culturally embed and promote new values, mind sets and concepts of life, they have the potential to create a consciousness for the limitations of natural resources as part of their comprehensive vision of transformation. Hence, ecological sustainability should be one point of conversation between African Initiated Churches, established religious development organizations and international development cooperation.

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