



## Faith-Based Organizations and Poverty Reduction Strategy in Liberia (2008-2011)

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### **Abstract**

The article explored the role Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) played in poverty reduction strategy of Liberia over a specified period 2008-2011. Five organizations were studied, namely: the Lutheran Development Services (LDS), CARITAS Monrovia Office, Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), Community Development Services Program of the United Methodist Church, and Humanity First Liberia. The paper adopted a qualitative research method and a case study design. The study materials consisted primarily of relevant scholarly literature and documents on the poverty reduction program of Liberia, as well as program reports, evaluations, interviews, and plans from the five sampled FBOs in Liberia. Significantly, the article argues for the role of five FBOs in Liberia's development efforts on the grounds that secular development practitioners have not paid enough attention to the role of religion and/or FBOs in development thinking and practice. For instance, Jeffery Haynes states that "the role of religion was often explicitly excluded from the national development programs by modernization processes often led by secular government practitioners in many parts of the developing world" (Haynes 2007, p. 4), of which Liberia is part. The overall conclusion based on the findings revealed that the role of the five FBOs was included in the poverty reduction strategy program of Liberia from 2008–2011. It pointed to the separation of state and religion and the fact that the Republic of Liberia is a secular state in the 1986 constitution. Even though the role of the five FBOs was excluded, the conclusion is that, on the ground, in the Liberian context, the five FBOs are actively involved with poverty reduction or development work to the extent that they contributed to two pillars of the poverty reduction strategy: infrastructure, basic social services, and economic revitalization.

**Keywords:** *FBOs; Liberia; Poverty; Reduction*

### **Introduction**

Liberia is one of the least developed countries in West Africa, with low income, food insecurity, and a high poverty rate across communities, particularly in rural areas where 51% of the population resides (WFP 2016). According to the World Food Program (WFP) (2016) report, 83.8% of the entire population in Liberia lives on \$1.25 a day. Liberia is also one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking at the bottom of the human development index (UNDP 2015).

Even though there is slight improvement after the fourteen (14) plus years of the brutal civil war in Liberia, the country has been at peace since 2003. The economy has been rapidly growing since 2003-2015. On the contrary, this social and economic growth, as mentioned, "has not been universally felt, nor are they sustainable" (PAPD 2018:14). Notably, the reality for a significant portion of the Liberian rural and urban population is still acute poverty.

The government of Liberia has made progress by establishing institutions to address the poverty situation. For instance, the Liberia Poverty Reduction Strategy Document (PRS 2008–2011). In this poverty reduction strategy, the role of the faith-based organization as a change agent for the transformation of the church and society was excluded. This article therefore explores the role faith-based organizations (FBOs) played in the poverty reduction strategy of Liberia over a specified period of 2008–2011.

It is important to mention that the main argument of this article is that role of FBOs diminishes as society gets secular and that religion is irrelevant to poverty reduction and or development work. Furthermore, the early scholars of development, as well as the modern development theorists and classical social theory claim that, when it comes to development it worked well with secularism (Selinger, 2004 p.532). Weber and Durkheim argued that, with the advancement in modern society the entire world would be secularised, and the role of religion would decline or diminish (Selinger,2004).

## ***Methodology***

While exploring the role of FBOs in poverty reduction in Liberia, both documents and qualitative interviews were used to collect data from institutions and the natural environments of the respondents. A total of fifteen respondents from four Christian FBOs and one Muslim FBO as well as six persons who have directly benefited from the poverty reduction program initiated by those FBOs. Furthermore, findings were gathered from program coordinators, program managers and program beneficiaries who benefited from the programs on one hand, and the coordinators and managers of projects who have right hand knowledge about the workings of their institutions on the other hand. The aim of the interviews was to attempt to shed light on each of the organizations own direction on range of activities or services engaged in over the period 2008-2011, reasons for having those activities and some examples of successes/strengths, and weaknesses/short comings of FBOs in poverty reduction in Liberia. An attempt to answering those three sub research questions will obviously be proving answers to the main research question. In this way, it was not very difficult to arrange or categorize the information into parts and in the same ways it was not also difficult for those that were interview to give additional answers to the questions. The central idea is to give the actual voices of the respondents before a thematic analysis or discussion. It is therefore with this, that the below discussion was based on.

## ***Key Questions***

The article explores the following key questions: What role Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) played in poverty reduction strategy of Liberia over a specified period 2008-2011? What activities or services were the FBOs engaged in over the poverty reduction period 2008-2011? Why these activities?

## **Poverty Reduction Activities Undertaken by FBOs (2008-2011)**

To fully provide the kind of answers that are needed to explore the role of faith based organisations in Poverty Reduction Strategy in Liberia, one needs to give the range of activities or services untaken by each FBO sampled within the period under study. This section outlines the role of selected FBOs in poverty reduction.

## **Caritas Monrovia**

An examination of CARITAS documents (reports, evaluations, & profiles) shows that is a development arm of the Catholic Archdiocese of Monrovia that operates in seven Counties with the prime role in Sustainable Agriculture, Rural Development cooperation and Humanitarian aid /relief to the poor and vulnerable people and communities (CARITAS 2009). This organization has been deeply involved in poverty reduction as far back as 1971 by the “inspiration through the Gospel and the Catholic Social Teaching based on the value of every human being and the solidarity to provide a dignified existence for everyone, regard less of age, gender, sexual orientation, origin or political orientation” (CARITAS 2009). In an interview, the role of CARITAS in Liberia’s PRS was noted as follows:

Well, our NGO play a role in economic revitalization, infrastructure and basic social services. Meeting basic food needs [...] income generation, like village saving, susu, club and community food needs. We introduced small holder Agriculture farming in rural communities mhm to make the farmers graduate from [...] food insecurity to food security. Really, we give tools, seeds, cutlasses, hoes, shovels, many more to empower the farmers to engage in the farming activities. I tell you we have been building hand pumps 2114, latrines 415 hmm is not easy but we are on it (C-1, interview, July 10, 2016)

When asked whether this role was mentioned in the PRS or not C-1 observed as follows: “Well... as far as I know the PRS did not attach any responsibilities to us during the implementation of the poverty reduction program. But I read in the PRS document different roles and responsibilities cross cutting for Government Ministries and agencies. To say CARITAS, you are responsible for this pillar...it was not done it all” (C-1, interview, July 10, 2016). In addition C-1 and C-2 in separate interviews made reference to the findings that the role mentioned above was not a direct role or responsibilities that was assigned to their FBO by the Government during the poverty reduction program of Liberia to perform ,but there has existed for their FBO development profile that has consistently been looking into programs that reduce poverty to some extent especially so in rural communities where the most affected and vulnerable people are found ( C-1 and C-2 interview July 10 & 12, 2016).

Another thing that was brought up during the interview was to find out whether the community people are benefiting from these poverty reducing activities. I try to seek the level to which the poverty reducing activities are reducing poverty in their community. Speaking with one of the beneficiaries on the bridge project this is what was said:

Well for me...from the time, Liberia came here, cars cannot reach here at all, lo-[these] people build this thing for us, we are happy now you see me, my cassava, plantain, with the pepper I can take to the market to sell. your self can see the town ...to buy zinc that was not small thing for the water that was on the road cannot make the car to come with zinc, and no way to sell what you put in the ground before. We can buy clothes, food, get place to sleep and do plenty things (Beneficiary interview July 10, 2016).

This finding revealed that as the result of FBOs invention of the beneficiaries now receive building materials and sell their farm products,

## **The Community Services Program of the UMC**

The reports of the Community Development Program of the United Methodist Church disclosed that, her role in poverty reduction generally is to serve as the catalyst for the transformation and social economic development of the republic of Liberia through its areas of ministries (LAC/UMC 2010).

In an interview with two staff of this FBO about the role in the PRS. The two staffs have stated that they have idea about the PRS and how it started but their FBO was not equally mentioned as stated in

previous finding but they play an active role in poverty reduction even before and during the PRS. This is what M-1 explained as their FBO role in the PRS: “For me... before I tell you about our role in the PRS, let me tell you about what the United Church has been during hennn before till now. Let me tell you [...] my brother, the church you see here mhm started her community work among the poor people way back in 1926 [.....] through local partners and our Americans and Europeans missionaries.” She continued, “We get [we have/] ...Ganta mission with Hospital, Agriculture activities, schools; Gbarnga mission the something, yaah. Camphor mission and Garson mission [...] the same community services for the poor and vulnerable men and women. Well, coming straight to your question now our FBO role in the Liberia PRS was not something to say [...] our name was in their paper per say, but in my right mind [ ....] we are doing the same program in their paper.”

The second staff M-2 explained their FBO role in the PRS

welcome my dear brother and thanks for selecting our FBO. Well, the PRS has several pillars and [.....] has state actors coordinating from the national level. you see [.... ...] they tell which NGOs will do this or that on which pillars or not. Technically, [ ...] our FBO that did not project itself at that national level to say Mr. government... here we are [...] where will you place us in the pillars,

Liberia.

So then with this poverty reducing activities, why were you left out of the PRS?

well maybe .... since we are Christian organization, they left us alone to do our own things.

As indicated in these findings the FBO was left out of the poverty reduction program because it was a Christian organization.

### **The Lutheran Development Service (LDS)**

A thorough reading into the Lutheran Development Services (LDS) documents revealed that, LDS offer services to God’s people in an impartial way. The vision and mission of the Lutheran Church Related FBO which implement highly quality holistic development program with emphasis of “basic human needs regardless of religion, tribe, origin, beliefs and political affiliation with the overall goal of contributing to the improvement in the living standard of rural and poor population in Liberia (LDS 2008).”

The institution works with people for the fulfillment of their basic needs in health, food security, and small business development initiatives. It also uses existing knowledge as well as social or cultural elements useful to development in any given community. LDS play a role in poverty reduction by promoting and supporting human rights advocacy and community peace building through Trauma healing and reconciliation program as well as HIV/AIDS activities (LDS 2008).

L-1 explained the role they have played in the PRS;

Our NGO was engaged in agriculture, distribution non-food items in rural communities, in the agriculture area we’ve multiply (multiplied) seeds, cuttings and divide (divided) on the farmers. Re-settled some rural poor families with mhm non-food items to begin with. You see [...] we multiply (multiplied) goat, chicken, pigs, cow, sheep and give them to farmers. This is the way [...] our FBO has been taken care of the vulnerable here yaahhhh.

This finding as indicated by L-2 had specific emphasis as express.

Well, our NGO play a role in two pillars of the Poverty Reduction Program; economic revitalization, infrastructure and basic social services. Under basic social services were engaged in Education and Health ...you know. For economic activities were meeting basic food needs [...] income generation, like village saving, susu, club and community food needs. We introduced small holder Agriculture farming in rural communities mhm to make the farmers graduate from [...] food insecurity to food security. Really, we give tools, seeds, cutlasses, hoes, shovels, many more to empower the farmers to engage in the farming activities.

This FBO has been engaged with farming activities, health, and education programs that has help to improve the lives of rural residents.

### **The Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) PRS**

YWCA plays a role in poverty reduction by providing educational services to women in Liberia both in urban and rural communities (YWCA 2009 p. 6). The YWCA play a role in poverty reduction as noted from their reports by making sure that she “engages in the formulation of policies, programs, advocacy and services that will better the lives of women in Liberia and guarantee women and girls’ human rights are protected, respected and fulfilled” (YWCA 2011 p. 3).

The findings gathered show that empowerment through skills development is a very important tool in poverty reduction as expressed by Y-1 in an interview concerning their role in FBO poverty reduction program of Liberia as: “Well, let me tell you [...] working with the poor people, especially so vulnerable women in slums communities is not a strange thing to YWCA – Liberia. Since, 1961 I was a little girl YWCA has been taken care of [...] vulnerable women up to present time. No joke about it [...] we seriously in advocating for the rights of women against all forms of gender based violence and all forms of discriminations.” She repeated: “we have a strong women empowerment program... like in sewing, tailoring, tie and died, baking, soap making, and hair dressing. This is how we do it [...] the women are group into five or three after gaining the vocational skills [...] we give them money to establish their own business with what they have learn [/learned/]”

It was discovered that FBO played a meaningful role in advocating for the rights of women against all forms gender based violence and all forms of discriminations in the Liberian setting. This is how Y-2 puts it in the interview;

You see in our society women are always excluded in many aspects ... so we have been speaking for most of them to come up. Today you see we have a female president all has been with the help of advocating for the rights of women against all forms of discriminations. To tell you the fact our FBO has been on the front lines writing in the newspapers, conducting workshops, seminars well as the radio stations.

### **Humanity First Liberia in the PRS**

It is a Muslim FBO working with the poorest and vulnerable in the Liberian society. HFL continues to “promote peace and understanding based upon mutual tolerance and respect, they have also play a role in relieving suffering caused by natural disasters or human conflicts, like in the case of the after math of the Liberia civil crisis and heling the youthful population of Liberia to strengthen their capacity to help themselves (HFL 2009).”

This finding shows that the provision of technical skills is one of the effective ways of reducing poverty in context to the Liberia society. It was mentioned in an interview with H-1 as it explains the role in poverty reduction:

We have given providing skills in plumbing, electricity, general construction, carpentry, driving and many more. The thing is we [ ...*sound*] have a program out that cut across education, health, vocational colleges, water for life and food for life. Young youth get the skills to help better their lives in the future.

Tell me now with these youth training program, why were you not included in the PRS?

H-1 expressed these word:

For me I see this as something that was planned by the government and partners to leave us out so we can continue to do private business as we have been doing long ago.

This FBO here provide skills for rural dwellers but continues to do poverty reduction in rural liberia,

## Conclusion

The first sub research question in this chapter is what range of activities or services the FBOs were engaged in and how has this varied over the period (2008- 2011)? It was noted or discovered from interviews and documents that, all the FBO, sampled in the research were engaged in different program activities including but not limited to Agriculture, Micro- Finance, both preventative and curative health services, Education-vocational and skills development programs, female empowerment workshops and seminars, and right based approaches as part of their role in-poverty reduction. Secondly, it was also indicated throughout the finding's presentation, with clear evidence from informants and documents that FBOs were not directly included in the poverty reduction document.

## Reasons Why FBOs Undertake These Activities

### Key Reasons for FBOs Activities

An attempt in answering this sub- research question will consider specific activities as role played by the FBOs. Secondly, this was also intended to find out reasons for implementing those specific activities connected to the poverty reduction strategy during the period under consideration.

In the findings, two of the FBOs sampled had direct micro-finance loan, while the other three had it indirectly from the sales of agriculture products. This means that the farmers had cooperative farm, and then after the sales of the proceed the cash is used to give out money for other business purposes. I was interested in finding out the reason(s) for implementing micro-loan at the time of poverty reduction.

### Micro-loan

L-2 explained “for me our micro-finance program really helping people in the rural communities. Some of the people don't have anything to show to us before we give them money or loan. All we want is for them to be a member of the community and show interest in selling or making farms with the money than we will give it to you and work with you.”

I also find out from a beneficiary that the micro- loan given by the FBO has help some of them in meaningful ways as she explains:

well... for me when I get the money, I use it for selling business and when we sell the profit I make from it... is the one I use to get food for the family, use it to buy clothes for myself and the children, build homes and get some money to do plenty things. When I do all these things, then I become happy and able to stand on my own.

## Agriculture

Agriculture was one of the specific project activities in the development profile of all the Faith Based Organisations as noted from documents and respondents respectively. I spoke with C-2 why was this under taken, he has this to say:

For me...the reason for doing all this small holder agriculture work is just to make community dwellers to be sustainable and self-sufficient in food production and to improve their livelihood. To take them from the level where they can be for once food secure. You see, if we just lay back all our community people will surely be hungry and the situation will lead to... sicknesses and diseases and further cause untimely death. So, our intervention as a church is timely and is meaningful especially in rural community.

Another beneficiary was interviewed and he confirms that he is doing by far better than before from the agriculture activities. He explained the following;

I plant cassava on a big portion of a land each year harvest the cassava and transform cassava into gari and sell many bags on the market. I use the money I make from selling my gari to buy plenty selling things for my shop [*customer came to buy*] and the shop in turn around make money for regular farming activities all the time. As you can see [...] I am living good life, my children going to good school.

The produce from the farm now helping to empower the beneficiaries thereby opening shops and businesses for the upkeep of the family.

## Health

The Faith Based Organisations played extensive role both in the curative and preventative health services as noted and uncovered from both the interviews as well as field visits and documents. This was one of their major project activities in rural communities in Liberia. In conversation with one of the respondents H-1, this is what he explained:

well... you see we are building clinics and new hospitals in some rural communities in Liberia. But again, let me tell you we continue to supply some poor and vulnerable people with free medical services. We have a mobile team that take health to those who cannot reach us.

One of the beneficiaries interviewed said the following:

Well...the way the people been teaching [...] in this place about how to have safe sex it is helping me too much. now I have only one child and married. I did not stay in my parents' home to get pregnant but in my husband home. Now the child pa and my seh [...] taking care.

The beneficiaries get health services free from this FBO both curative and preventative services. It has helped to promote healthy living condition in rural communities

## Education

It is worth not noting that one of the project activities that was directed to towards poverty reduction as I found out in project documents in my possession as well as from interview were education and skills development programs. This takes in to account formal and non-formal education and vocational skills development programs.

Y-1 explained her reasons for implementing such activities:

Well the good thing we do is to improve lives [...] so we try to give those that have gone through the [...] training some tools and working materials to be able to use after graduating from the vocational school. This way they are not just trained and left to go looking for job to do. we create the job and empower them so that they can be forever [...] self-sufficient.

C-2 also stated:

Well most of the FBOs had project target group that would otherwise contribute to the well-being of others.

A Beneficiary said this expression:

I finish with school and driver [...] Christian Health Association of Liberia, it was good thing to know how to drive. The driver work can give every month to take care of my three (3) children and woman home.

Technical skills gain empowered this beneficiary to now work with health institution as driver. He/she can support and sustained the family.

## Conclusion

The second research question is; Why the Faith Based Organisations had these activities? The five FBOs selected for this study mentioned both in their reports and interviews some of the reasons for playing this role or implementing the above-mentioned activities. Empowerment for self-reliable and to improve current standards of living. The findings show evidence of intervention taking place amongst the poor and vulnerable people lacking basic social services that are needed for the enhancement and improvement of human lives.

## Thematic Analysis of Data Collected

The focus or direction of this research was to find out the role of FBOs in poverty reduction strategy of Liberia 2008- 2011. The interviews, program reports, evaluations, and plans that FBOs provided some meaningful contributions in two pillars of the poverty reduction program specifically in agriculture, education, health, and micro-finance. Significantly, FBOs bring qualities to development work; FBOs Understand and live in the Culture of the Community, Commitment for Service and Compassion and FBOs Work with the Poorest at Grassroots in Liberia. And finally, proselytism as a weakness on the part of FBOs in development will also be analysed.

## The Role of FBOs in Poverty Reduction Strategy from Liberia Perspectives

The Poverty Reduction Document as well as reports, plans and evaluations, revealed that the role of FBOs particularly the five sampled FBOs roles were not mentioned, in fact they were altogether implicitly excluded. This further confirmed my motivation for the study, that the role of religion and or FBOs in development thinking and practice have not been given considerable attention by secular development practitioners as mentioned by Haynes that, "the roles of religion were often explicitly excluded from the national development programs by modernisation processes often led by secular government in many parts of the developing world" (Haynes 2007 p. 4).

This was expressed by all the project coordinators and program managers as C-1 said:

Well... as far as I know the PRS did not attach any responsibilities to us during the implementation of



the poverty reduction program. But I read in the PRS document different roles and responsibilities cross cutting for Government Ministries and agencies. To say CARITAS, you are responsible for this pillar....it was not done it all.

This finding draw attention to the theories about the role of religion in poverty reduction/ development. It was very clear to me by the above findings that, the arguments, debates and disputes about the views that religion is a constrained rather than a source or catalyst of development in the sense of secular development practitioners by its exclusion from public project (Opschoor, 2007). Again, the informants were also not very clear on the reasons why they were left out of the poverty reduction strategy but made some assumptions as M -2 mentioned; ‘well maybe.... since we are Christian organisation, they left us alone to do our own things’. I was also very keen to get views from the Muslim FBO in this research concerning their exclusion and H-1 also expressed similar idea as; “for me I see this as something that was planned by the government and partners to leave us out so we can continue to do private business as we have been doing long ago”. This finding from M-2 and H-2 speak clearly about the role of religion in the private sphere. Significantly, a group of social scientists are also of the view that, the more society becomes advance religious activities and religious institutions will again decline, vanish, or fade and will now become private affairs for individual and family members (Habermas 2020, p136).

In line with the above discussion, it was revealed in Article 14 of the Liberia Constitution that the State is separated from religion as written as:

All persons who in the practice of their religions, conduct themselves peaceable, not obstructing others and conforming to the standards set herein, shall be entitled to the protection. No religious denomination or sect shall have any exclusive privilege or preference over any other, but all shall be treated Like; and no religious tests shall be required for any civil or military officer for the exercise of civil rights. Consistent with the separation of state and religion, the Republic Shall establish no state religion (Article 14 of the Liberia Constitution).

Since the constitution of any state is an organic law and one of the highest policy frameworks that is often used to design other documents, it would be reasonable to think that the implicit exclusion of FBOs in poverty reduction strategy to some extent might have been attributed to the above constitutional provision. The role of religion in development as perceived by Giri et al (2004) can be discussed as follow: first, the misguided perception that, religion will be driven out as societies become more developed and modern. Secondly, religion is socially irrelevant as it is in the private spheres. Thirdly, some religions are incompatible with development. Finally, religion cannot be influenced or changed. In the views of secular development practitioners’ religion is a traditional, conservatives and counterproductive to development (Jennings 2013). Drawing from these theoretical viewpoints, it would be logical to think that, Faith Based Organizations were implicitly excluded because the state and religion are separated and agree with M-2 and H-1 that: “well for me I think we were left out because we are religious organizations and the government wants us maybe to do our private things in our own range”.

As indicated in the above empirical findings that, the five sampled FBOs were implicitly excluded or not mentioned in the Poverty Reduction document, I also discovered that in practice, that is on ground, FBOs contributed in two pillars of the poverty reduction program namely: Pillar II: Economic Revitalization and Pillar IV: Infrastructure and basic social services respectively (PRS 2008, p, 49). Additionally, as evidence from the interviews and program reports FBOs implemented varieties of projects and programs activities in the following thematic areas: agriculture, Micro-finance, health and education. Consistent with the interviews, programs report, plans and evaluations each FBO had development profile considering those mentioned programs and projects with different practical implementation schedule activities that indeed varied over the poverty reduction period.

This was an interesting finding as expressed by L-2;

Well, our NGO play a role in two pillars of the Poverty Reduction Program; economic revitalization, infrastructure and basic social services. Under basic social services were engaged in Education and Health ...you know. For economic activities were meeting basic food needs [...] income generation, like village saving, susu, club and community food needs. We introduced small holder agriculture farming in rural communities mhm to make the farmers graduate from [...] food insecurity to food security. Really, we give tools, seeds, cutlasses, hoes, shovels, many more to empower the farmers to engage in the farming activities.

In his book *The Liberia History up to 1847*, Guannu confirmed and acknowledge that education and health for example, were part of the plan by the American Churchmen and politicians who founded Liberia as a medium of the assumed western civilisation and religion in Africa (Guannu 2010 p. 29). Because of this, Guannu noted that, the American Churchmen and politicians opened way for an increase in different denominations like the Baptist, Methodist, Catholics Pentecostals etc. Guannu observes that, today those denominations along with some Muslims FBOs are responsible for education, health, agriculture, water and sanitation and many more; thereby ensuring the reduction of poverty at certain level throughout the Liberian communities (Guannu 2010; UMCOR 2012).

Furthermore, this finding confirms that, religion is playing role in certain key development aspects of the Liberia communities. This was made know in theory when, Deneulin and Bano (2009) recognised five main roles of religion in development that are connected directly and indirectly confirming the finding above. They firstly, recognise that religion is a significant contributor in developmental goals such as economic growth. This in practice was one of the areas the sampled FBOs contributed to during the period under consideration (economic revitalisation during the poverty reduction program of Liberia). They met basic food needs by the production and an involvement into small holder agriculture activities that basically promoted food security and provided financial resources (CARITAS 2009). Secondly, they said religion is a solid foundation for forming people's values that affect legitimate development, thirdly, religious freedom is recognised as the basic human rights, fourth, religion is a part of human well-being, and lastly, religion is a political force shaping societies economically, socially and politically. Therefore, religion is very inherently relevant to poverty reduction/ development (Opschoor 2007). Moreover, Jefferey Haynes, among others confirms this by referring to the point that, with the growing of secularism all over in society the role and the meaning of religion is not losing at all (Haynes 2007). Wendy Tyndale, also indicated that FOB bodies and development bodies will make common agenda for achieving the MDGs (Tyndale 2011. P 210). More to this, at the end of the MDGs in 2015 at a United Nations assembly a development frame work was also curved called the Sustainable Development Goals that has identified and seeking to seriously tap on FBOs to achieving the SDGs (UN 2015). Furthermore, Tyndale mentioned that FBOs are responsible for the work of many of the MDGs in 2015 and currently the SDGs regarding poverty reduction and Human development. He said FOBs are responsible for wide range of income generating programs and development activities like vocational courses, community development, leadership training, education, health and Agriculture. In Africa, religious groups are running almost half of the schools and hospitals (Tyndale 2011, pp 2010-117). In line with Tyndale, the United Nations also recognises the positive contributions of FBOs to poverty alleviation in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and it claims that this has been very effective in societies where there are many religious activities (UN 2015). Additionally, Haynes pointed out that there is a need for "robust partnership" between secular development agencies and FBOs, repeating the fact that FOBs cannot work by themselves (Haynes 2007 p. 127).

## Education

It was observed that in most rural communities in Liberia FBOs have more if not all educational facilities as compared to Government. For instance, the Community Development Services of the United Methodist Church with a project goal of “improving the quality of learning for disadvantaged and poor children in rural communities” (LAC/UMC 2010) has played a major role in the education sector. They believe that it is very great to build the human skills as a means of reducing poverty.

In line with the above, this is what a program beneficiary expressed:

For me all I can say now is that this skill training open my eye boy to see real and know my real, real self. First, first time, I did not know that I can do something with my hands to be very good that... I can live on. With the sewing, I learn in school now I am sewing uniform for all the children in the public school here. It pays me good money. For two year now ... I build a good house out of what I get from the school as a pay ... send my children to school, help friend and family member.

In Amartya Sen’s definition of human capacities, he considers education as an important part of developing the human capacities or skills. He also stresses that as a person learns and gain skills he or she become very useful and very productive thereby contributing to the process of developing oneself (Sen 2001, p. 292). Education as a poverty reducing activities was mentioned in the poverty reduction document as one of the key activities to poverty reduction on the list of the MDGs up to 2015 and currently in the new development framework the Sustainable Development Goals as well (PRS 2008; UN 2015). Informant C-2 noted that, “most of the FBOs had project target group that would otherwise contribute to the well-being of others”. I observe that the education of youthful population, women and children were very fundamental to their projects.

As an evidence of this statement, beneficiary from a vocational skills training program expresses the impact of the education on him and his family as well:

I finish with school and driver [...] Christian Health Association of Liberia, it was good thing to know how to drive. The driver work can give me money every month to take care of my three children and woman home.

In line with the above finding from one of the project beneficiaries it confirms the point or idea that education make way for people to get job and the job also serve as a means by which one can take care of his wife and children (Hopper 2018, p.85). It was also realised that most of the people who could not afford at all to take care of their family could now do so by taking care of some additional relatives. Another Beneficiary also express similar ideas as she states; “before my children where living with different people but now with the skills I have... and the job ...I am taken care of many family members”.

## Micro-finance

CARITAS Monrovia Office noted in its report that, while commercial and traditional Banks are given loan to people based on collateral, “we are given our micro-loan because on trust and empowerment scheme, so we are to only monitor and train them for multiplication” (CARITAS 2009).With this finding World Bank (2005) observes that the objective of Micro-finance is not just to provide credit for the poor for fighting against poverty alone but in a way, try to create institutions that will deliver financial services to the poor who are ignored by traditional commercial banks. The informants emphasised on how FBOs micro-finance reduces poverty, create self- employment and empowerment.

One of the beneficiaries confirmed this when she said:

Well... for me when I get the money, I use it for selling business and when we sell the profit I make from it... is the one I use to get food for the family, use it to buy clothes for myself and the children, build homes and get some money to do plenty things. When I do all these things, then I become happy and able to stand on my own. This loan business can make people strong and make you to stop begging in the streets, communities, or friends.

The Lutheran Development Services (LDS) noted in its report that the Micro-finance program is a sustainable instrument that provides capital and ensuring growth and improvement of lives in rural communities that has been ignored by banks in Liberia (LDS 2008). This is how L-2 expressed it when he was asked:

for me our micro-finance program really helping people in the rural communities. Some of the people don't have anything to show to us before we give them money or loan. All we want is for them to be a member of the community and show interest in selling or making farms with the money than we will give it to you and work with you.

One of the beneficiaries confirmed this when she said these expressions: "since the program came here and I receive the loan...I can tell you things are not the same at all... things that I never use to do on my own I can do them now using money". The FBOs concentrated on income generating activities as one of the poverty reduction programs. What the programs and projects achieved as discussed with similar concept as observe by the World Bank was by getting the poor and vulnerable people in rural communities into economic activities that would otherwise generate income and bring about growth in economic and providing job for people (World Bank 2001 p. 8).

## **Agriculture**

The informants emphasised agriculture as one of the main economic activities on ground that FBOs were engaged in for the research period. It was also realized that all the agriculture programs varied over the period in cash crops and vegetables that are sustainable and improved food security.

This was evidenced through these expressions from one of the programs managers C-2:

For me... the reason for doing all this small holder agriculture work is just to make community dwellers to be sustainable and self-sufficient in food production and to improve their livelihood. To take them from the level where they can be for once food secure. You see, if we just lay back all our community people will surely be hungry and the situation will lead to... sicknesses and diseases and further cause untimely death. So, our intervention as a church is timely and is meaningful especially in rural community.

World bank indicated that, in low-income countries a broad-based growth in agriculture productivity is one of the most effective ways of reducing poverty because it increases the income of smaller holder farmers; raises their wages earned and improve availability, quality and accessibility of food (World Bank 2005).

One of the beneficiaries said these words about the agriculture growth in his life:

I plant cassava on a big portion of a land each year harvest the cassava and transform cassava into gari and sell many bags on the market. I use the money I make from selling my gari to buy plenty selling things for my shop [*customer came to buy*] and the shop in turn around make money for regular farming activities all the time. As you can see [...] I am living good life, my children going to good school, my living place is in a good condition and so when any development come

in our community, I can be part of the first people to pay my own part of it.

More than what we call the direct benefits, increase in agriculture productivity also brings strong indirect benefits to the poor by reducing food prices and creating jobs (World Bank 2005). In real life situation, poor household in rural and urban spend huge proportion of their income on staple food.

## Health

In the health sectors in Liberia, FBOs continue to play major role as a means of poverty reduction. I observe that it is often the poor at the community levels that really suffer the consequences of poorly equipped social facilities or lack of health centers.

In the expressions of one the beneficiaries of water and sanitation program he expresses what the provision of the water and sanitation services are doing for them to reducing poverty:

For me now, I am strong to work and find money and food for me and my children ...but before the NGO people came [...] there was too much cholera outbreak taking place .... because we [...] were drinking water from well, creek, river and other dirty water place. Now, now... we are not experiencing too much running stomach again like it used to be. we are using good water from the hand pumps for drinking. We are also using the pit latrines for toilets instead of the bush. we use to be weak and even died from running stomach [.....] and there was no way for us to do hard work and take care of our homes.

It was cleared to me as noted in FBOs reports that their role in the water and sanitation programs were all intended for the sole purpose of ensuring that the poor in rural communities are strong and healthy to work and become productive in their communities. In this way, the reports indicated that poverty is reduced because most if not all engage in some meaningful projects with the goal of taking care of the family livelihoods (LAC/UMC 2010; CRITAS 2009).

Based on reports, the FBOs named many hospitals and clinics as their contribution to poverty reduction in Liberia for example: Ganta Methodist Hospital, St. Joseph Catholic Hospital, Phebe Hospital, Amadyia hospitals and many other clinics (LDS 2008; CARITAS 2009).

The informants H-1 said;

well... you see we are building clinics and new hospitals in some rural communities in Liberia. But again, let me tell you we continue to supply some poor and vulnerable people with free medical services. We have a mobile team that take health to those who cannot reach us.so you see our concern is for the people to get well and began to work for their family.

The role of FBOs in the health sector is confirmed by the World Bank president in a statement made 2002 that 50 percent of the work in health and education in Sub- Sahara Africa is done by the FBOs but somehow the FBOs cannot talk to them concerning their project in the areas of health (UN Wire 2002 cited in: Kitchen 2002). In the case of the five sampled FBOs whose role even in the health sector is not mentioned by the Government policy document the poverty reduction document, the World Bank president indicated that one way of the other “FBOs that provide services in the areas of health and education had disappeared of the policy and evidence map” ( UN Wire 2002 cited in :Kitchen 2002). As mentioned earlier that four of the five FBOs sampled are currently operating health and medical services, the World Bank president also noted that, the disappearance of the role of FBOs from policy and evidence map occurred even though the fact remains that Islamic hospitals and Christian Missionaries hospitals were of the first modern health care providers to be established (Shaw and Conn 2002). Also in many low -to-middle income countries of which Liberia is a part, even after colonization ended and despite massive

health systems reconfigurations, Faith-Based health providers have maintained a strong presence. It was also cleared that the presence of the five selected FBOs were felt across the 15 political sub-divisions of Liberia with different health projects that varied over the period under consideration.

This is what M-2 said in these expressions;

Let me tell you... our programs in the health area is all over. We have clinics if not hand pumps or some health education program that we have one way of the other untaken in almost every village.

FBOs play key role in providing health care in many parts of the world. World Health Organisation (WHO 2007) indicated that FBOs own and operate an estimated 30 percent to 70 percent of health facilities in some parts of Africa, FBOs trained number of nurses and midwives. In addition, they are often found in remote and rural areas where the public sector has difficulty in attracting and training health workers thereby increasing accessibility and equitable distribution of health services for vulnerable populations (WHO 2007).

### **FBOs Understand and Live in the Culture of the Community**

The efforts of development practitioners may be fruitful depending on understanding the culture of the people to whom you want to work with. Informants confirmed that they bring to development work quality that makes them to have easy entrance in the field as they work with the aim of reducing poverty.

This was expressed in the words of Y-2 as she explained:

For me one thing I know is that...FBO know and live in the culture of the people [...] you know enn. Let me show you one example, hmmm, in Bomi county an NGO from the government program build one latrine [...] close to the entrance of the poro bush a... sacred place can you imagine [...] for this you know enn the people are not using it all and wasted in the grass. We live along side with the people so their values, norms and traditions are all known to us. We respect their sacred places and know how they respond to development work.

In theory, it was indicated that FBOs have on ground strong and permanent relationship with local community members. According to Hoffstaedter & Tittensor, this make FBOs better suited to reach into different community locations and proving indept link for the community (Hoffstaedter & Tittensor 2013, p. 406). These five FBOs have strong cultural ties with the community they serve by presenting physically and engaging in daily lives of adherents. The fact that FBOs have cultural and pre-existing relationships from local religious leaders and institutions are a great advantage to FBOs while other secular development organisations must have spent considerable time to build up that relationship with the local population.

Y-1 also confirmed this by stating that: ‘ we know the people and the people know us...we are with them in bad time and good times. Our churches are there as well. We know how to relate to them.

### **Commitment to Service and Compassion**

It was now clear to me that, the FBOs sampled bring to poverty reduction or development work commitment to service and compassion. This finding is because of the motivation generated from religious teaching as stated by

H-1 in these expressions:

You see one good thing [...] I know about this NGO [...] is when you give us small work to do [...] we do it well. We will be doing it, doing it, and doing it [...] till we finish with it and turn it over

to the community. You see [...] we believe that our work is for God's people [...] so the same way God is committed to us that is the way we handle this work

Commitment and Compassion are two qualities Faith Based Organizations used in development project to achieve their goal for poverty reduction. In the Christian and Islamic doctrines, it is noted, that helping the poor often arises from commitment to what God has given you to do and compassion for the people you serve that are taught in their social creed as explain below. The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) challenges all Christians to assist any one in need (Scofield, 2002), and further make a clear reference to humanitarian work with commitment and compassion. In Christianity Jesus calls on his followers to do good to everyone because "anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God, or anyone who does not love his brother and sister" (1 John 3:10).

Additionally, in the Islamic tradition or faith for example, followers pay an obligatory 2.5 percent of their income as a means of helping the poor and less-fortunate brothers and sisters of their faith (Ali 1975). To some extent those followers are inspired by the doctrinal teaching on zakat that encourage them to have compassion for the poor. Hoffstaedter and Tittensor indicated that FBOs are committed and indeed they are motivated more and more to the people they are providing services for (Hoffstaedter and Tittensor 2013, p. 405)

### **FBOs Work with the Poorest at Grassroots in Liberia**

This is one of the key themes that was emphasized in the interviews with the nine informants who were program coordinators and officers. It was also mentioned in their reports in my possession. Additionally, it is worth noting that, findings from the reports of the program officers indicated the constant presence and role of the FBOs sampled in poverty reduction or development work generally in rural communities especially hard to reach places in the areas of education, health, Agriculture etc (LDS 2008; CRITAS 2009; LAC/UMC 2010). For instance, in the reports of the Community Development services of the United Methodist Church it was revealed that from 2008- 2011 their organization has constructed five new Schools and three Clinics in a very hard to reach communities among the poor (LAC/UMC 2010).

This was also confirmed by informant L-2 when she expressed the following:

Well [...] I don't know about other FBOs [...] but my LDS is strong in implementing project in a hard to reach community among the poorest people who cannot access basic social services. Places that Government cannot go [...] is where our project is right now. You will see for yourself when we take you into the field, my brother. we are in Lofa county, Barpolu and the south-eastern region.

In other related literature FBOs generally have grassroots presence in areas of operations. Ferris (2005) confirmed that, on ground in hard to reach places called remote areas especially so where they have been implementing project or doing mission work as their location. It was certainly clear that, why FBOs are on ground in these remote places, they are particularly known for making sure that the community is put together or organise, try in a way to have structure and systems through leadership as well as helping the poor with some material and financial resources and aid the community in voluntary community initiatives (Goldsmith 2006). Another research elsewhere besides Liberia revealed that, FBOs are even found in most inaccessible areas where Government services do not reach.

This concept was also confirmed by one of the beneficiaries as she stated the following during the interview:

Let me tell you... this NGO is the first to put is good school down with four houses for teacher. Our

children like it and it make the place look fine. From sine 1904, this is the first time.

Indeed, drawing from the views of informants and what is in theory or literature Faith Based Organisations presence are felt in hard to reach places in remote communities amongst the poor. This makes it likely possible to play significant roles in poverty reduction in the Liberia even though their roles were not mentioned in the poverty document of Liberia.

## **Social Action and Christian Mission**

From the interviews, it was now clear to me that some not all Faith Based Organisation use the program to convert others to their faith.

This was expressed by Y-2:

you see we have devotion every morning and counsel the people working here and those that we are training. I tell you the children whose parents cannot afford to send them to school in our school.... we have regular devotion for them and bible study as well.

The above finding as indicated by informant Y-2 expresses the idea as contained in the English Oxford Dictionary definition of proselytism as the process of converting a person from one idea, opinion, creed, or party to another (Fowler 2015) confirming this finding stated. I want to agree that this act of converting people to one's belief system called proselytism component in some FBOs as stated, has caused many to criticise the contribution of Faith to development. Kroessin and Mohamed also indicated that Christians as well as Islamic FBOs were also criticized for including proselytism in their services delivered to the poor and needy (Kroessin and Mohamed cited in: Clarke et al 2007). Specifically, social action and Christian mission also mentioned in James 1:27 caring for the less fortunate and vulnerable promote and sustain the Christian faith.

On the other hand, majority of the informants claimed that their projects are not intended to convert people over to their faith as stated by M-2 in the following expressions:

Well.... many people have come over to our churches [...] because of the work the FBO has done but they were not force or the project was not use to convert them. Sometime [...] people who make decision will say I will join the Methodist church because the church people like development[...]maybe if I join them, they will send my children to school, or give my children job besides the spiritual aspect of it. In short, people join because of what the church organization doing.

To be very critical, this finding has in indirect approach of getting people to join one's faith. You cannot all together agree that it is very perfect in self for the fact that the Churches and Mosques are in the community and the people see those projects to helping them, it is likely possible to join. James's indication might be very correct in this finding even though it is not directly stated that for Christian and Islamic FBOs proselytism is part of what they achieve at the end of the project (James 2011). Christian FBOs from the protestants backgrounds or tradition are highly criticised for their involvement into proselytism as an end game to achieving their missionary goal (Ferris 2005).

## **Lessons**

Lessons learned from the article has inform an implication that cooperating FBOs in poverty reduction program in Liberia would be important to "bridge" the development process, simply because FBOs are trusted members of their communities. One good reason for this would be that FBOs in Liberia and secular development agencies can make common agenda for achieving development goals in rural communities throughout Liberia. when it comes to poverty reducing activities or programs, FBOs are



directly and indirectly responsible for the work of many of the SDGs regarding poverty reduction and Human development. Furthermore, FBOs should be better integrated in secular poverty reduction programs because they are responsible for wide range of income generating programs and development activities like vocational courses, community development, leadership training, education, health, and agriculture. In view of the above, I therefore, want to agree with Haynes when he pointed out that there is a need for “robust partnership” between secular development agencies involve with development works and FBOs (Hayes 2007).

### **Conclusion**

It is important to note in this overall conclusion that on ground, in the Liberia context, FBOs are actively involved with poverty reduction or development work to the extent that they contributed to two pillars of the poverty reduction strategy: infrastructure and basic social services and economic revitalisation. The visible marks of FBOs can be seen in the areas of Education, Health, Agriculture and Micro-finance. The programs varied within the selected FBOs. For instance, all the sampled FBOs saw education as one of the effective tools for poverty reduction that has sustainable and lasting impacts and so they were engaged with education at primary, secondary, universities, colleges vocational and skills development as well as leadership training and empowerment components.

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