Article

The Ecumenical Movement and Development: The Case of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), 1963–2000 (Part 1)

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Abstract

Recent debates and policies on development reflect a growing recognition of the complex role of religion in development and most significantly of its contribution to social capital formation. Through an analysis of the history of the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) as one of the most significant ecumenical structures on the African continent, this contribution will discuss the role and significance of the ecumenical movement for social change (read: development). It underscores the crucial role of the AACC in the formation of social capital through its member churches and through its own international links to other organisations and ecumenical bodies in the period since its inception to the turn of the century. While I argue that the AACC has made a positive contribution in the formation of social capital, I nevertheless contend that not much has been done to draw on local epistemologies for development in its programmatic work.

Keywords: All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC); church and development; ecumenical movement in Africa; religious social capital; social transformation; theology and development

Introduction

The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) is a fellowship of churches that serves as "an ecumenical instrument facilitating synergy amongst its members, with the people of Africa" (see AACC 2018, iii). The AACC was conceived at an All Africa Church Conference held in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1958. It was formally inaugurated as a fellowship of consultation and co-operation among churches in Africa in Kampala, Uganda in 1963. With its current membership of 183 churches (in 42 African countries) and 24 National Councils of Churches, the AACC is one of the most significant ecumenical structures on the continent. Its highest policy body is the General Assembly which meets every four years and comprises representatives of member churches. This contribution on the history of the AACC emerges

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index
Volume 44 | Number 3 | 2018 | #4593 | 15 pages

https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/4593
ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)
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against the background of debates on the complex role of religion in Africa's development (see Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Ter Haar 2011; Ter Haar and Ellis 2006).[1] It will draw on the conceptual analysis of scholars who underscore the role of religious resources in promoting development by specifically highlighting the role of religious communities, including churches, in developing social capital (see Swart 2006, 2). However, as Wepener, Swart, Ter Haar and Barnard (2010, 67) observe, the "uniquely religious contributions of religious communities in social capital formation" is under-researched. Therefore, this contribution seeks to address this concern from the point of view of ecumenical theology. It offers a historical analysis of the contribution and significance of the AACC to ecumenical discourse on development since its inception in 1963 to the turn of twentieth century. This periodisation is borne out of an understanding of the ecumenical movement as a major characteristic of various aspects of the life of Christian churches in the twentieth century—not least in Africa (Amanze 1999, 5–6; Mugambi 1990). A sequel to this contribution will cover the period 2000 to the most recent AACC General Assembly held in Kigali, Rwanda in July 2018.

By focusing on institutional ecumenism, I am no less mindful of the various forms and notions of ecumenism (see Conradie 2013, 18; Sakupapa 2013, 156) and of debates on the crisis of institutional ecumenism. Secondly, my analysis takes cognisance of both the sociological and theological understandings of the church (see Sakupapa 2018, 4). In this vein, this article contributes to ongoing debates on the role of the churches in development as expressed in three interrelated discourses. The first is with regard to the discourse on theology and development. The second pertains to the critique of how this discourse finds expression in the curriculum on theology and development as offered at a number of South African universities. Within the South African context, Anthony Balcomb (2012, 11) has raised the concern that "not much theology is being done" in some such programmes.[2] Third, it contributes to the discourse on the history of the ecumenical movement in Africa.

The Role of Churches in Social Capital Formation

Notable South African scholars working in the broad field of religion and development, such as Ignatius Swart (2006, 348, 370; 2017), discuss the role of churches in development within the conceptual framework of social capital. Coined by the American novelist Henry James in his 1904 novel *The Golden Bowl* and popularised amongst others by Robert Putnam (2000, 19), the concept of social capital "refers to connections among individuals—social networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." In an earlier functionalist definition of social capital, Putnam highlighted the features of social organisation such as trust, norms, and networks that improve the adeptness of society by

1 For an overview of recent literature on this, see Swart, I., and Nell, E. 2016. "Religion and Development: The Rise of a Bibliography." *HTS Theological Studies* 72 (4), 1–27. See also Deneulin, S. 2013. *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

2 See response to such a critique by Haddad, B., Swart, I., and Nell, E. 2016. "Curriculum Design in Theology and Development: Human Agency and the Prophetic Role of the Church." *HTS Theological Studies* 72 (4), 1–8.

facilitating coordinated actions.[3] The social capital framework stresses the socialisation of individuals resulting from associational life (Smidt 2003, 221). Given this underlying emphasis on relationships, some infer that the Western concept of social capital is similar to the sub-Saharan African notion of *Ubuntu*. Ignatius Swart (2017, 232), a leading scholar on the South African debate on religion and social capital formation, has recently argued for a shift from social capital to a conceptual emphasis on religious social capital. This is significant not only because of Swart's attempt to explore what may be seen as distinct forms of social capital among churches (c.f. Coleman 2003, 41–45; Smidt 2003, 217), but more so given literature on the limits[4] of the notion of social capital when applied to churches and later on to ecumenical bodies such as the AACC (see Coleman 2003, 45). Swart (2017, 247) identifies religious ritual as a "consistently missing element in the contemporary international research focus on religion and social capital formation." His primary concern seems to be about the manner and extent to which religious ritual could be valued as a source of social capital formation (Swart 2017, 223).

This article is concerned with the theological motivation and self-understanding of the church's involvement in development. While critically appreciative of the legacy of the missionary movement in the fields of education and "health care" in most African countries, I understand the role of the church in development within the broader context of the *missio Dei* (God's mission). This implies an integral understanding of Christian witness (*marturia*), proclamation (*kerygma*), service (*diakonia*), fellowship (*koinonia*) and liturgy (*leitourgia*). For, as the missiologist David Bosch (2005, 512) argued, "mission has to be multidimensional in order to be credible and faithful to its origins and character."

Therefore, based on a literature survey and analysis of historical documents on the AACC, I offer an analysis of the role and significance of the AACC to social change and further discuss how this relates to the formation of social capital relevant to development within its constituency and through its own international links to other organisations and ecumenical bodies (see Gibbs and Ajulu 1999, 82). The contribution will specifically discuss the history and significance of the AACC in the formation of social capital relevant to development including social issues such as human rights, democratisation and governance. Such a history of Protestant ecumenical discourse on development would be inadequate if not situated within the broader global ecumenical context (see Sakupapa 2017, 184–186).

The Churches and Development: A Brief Overview of the History of Ecumenical Discourse on Development in Global Perspective

At least five contexts may be noted with reference to the history of ecumenical discourse on development. The first has to do with the World Council of Churches' (WCC) World Conference on Church and Society that was held in Geneva in 1966, regarded by many as the

3 For a useful overview of various definitions of social capital see Bjørnskov and Sønderskov (2013, 1228). For a critique of Putman's and other foundational contributions to the conceptual apparatus of social capital see John Field's (2003) *Social Capital*.

4 Coleman (2003, 44) identifies "the economic, rational-choice, and market models implicit in the metaphor" as one of the limits of the concept of social capital amongst others.

key landmark in Protestant theological and ecclesiastical concern with development (see Itty 1974, 6). As Ans van der Bent (1995, 121) argues, it was the Geneva Conference "that put the issues of world economic development ... on the agenda of the churches in a major way." The conference brought to the attention of the churches the structural factors at the heart of underdevelopment. The second is the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC (1968) which endorsed most of the conclusions of the Geneva Church and Society Conference. The Uppsala Assembly further urged that development must be at the heart of the churches' social witness. In the post-Uppsala period, there was a burgeoning conviction, namely that "justice should be the focus of the churches' participation in development" (Van der Bent 1995, 123).

The third context is related to a consultation entitled "In Search of a Theology of Development" that was held in Cartigny in 1969, organised by the Committee on Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX), a joint venture between the WCC and the Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace. The report of the consultation highlighted the deficiencies of the very notion of development. One of the critical voices at Cartigny (1969) was the Peruvian Roman Catholic priest Gustavo Gutiérrez[5] who favoured the concept of liberation (see SODEPAX 1969, 152). The fourth was within the context of a consultation on development projects organised by the WCC at Montreux, Switzerland in 1970. A significant outcome of this gathering was an understanding of development as aimed at three inter-related objectives, namely justice, self-reliance and economic growth. If the Indian economist, Samuel Parmar, significantly contributed towards such ecumenical thinking on development, the intuitions behind this new emphasis led to the establishment of the WCC's Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD) in 1970. The fifth context is therefore linked to the work of CCPD.

The CCPD developed an action-reflection programme that focused on the theme: "The Church and the Poor" following resolutions of the WCC Nairobi Assembly (1975). This study programme led to a trilogy published between 1977 and 1979.[6] The CCPD developed the theological concept of the "church of the poor" out of this study. In a joint statement issued by the CCPD and the WCC Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service (CICARWS) in 1974, the identification of the Church with the poor is almost raised to the rank of an additional *nota ecclesiae* (see CCPD/CICARWS 1975). Part of the statement reads:

> … we need to ask the ecclesiological question whether the Church can be the Church if it is not identified with the poor. Some would go even further and insist that the Church has to be poor in order to be identified with the poor. (1975, 45)

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5 Gustavo Gutiérrez developed his presentation at Cartigny further resulting in his widely acclaimed *A Theology of Liberation,* published in 1971.

6 The first results of the study were published in *Good News to the Poor: The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church* (1977), in which the problem of the relation of the poor in the early church and in the medieval period was examined. The second publication, *Separation without Hope* (1978), examined the relations between the poor and churches during the industrial revolution. The third publication, namely *Towards a Church of the Poor* (1979), was an outcome of a workshop held in Cyprus in 1978 at which the problem of the poor was further analysed and new theological perspectives and actions to be undertaken by churches formed the bulk of the publication.

Given the stress placed on the inseparability of praxis and reflection in liberation theologies, the notion of the "church of the poor" found affirmation among several liberation theologians. For example, Gustavo Gutiérrez[7] underscored the view that the poor belong to the understanding of the mystery of the church. Drawing on the French Domican Benoit Dumas's *Two Alienated Faces of the one Church*, Jose Miguez Bonino (1975, 41) argued:

> ... in our present situation as churches the Church does not recognize itself in the poor. It may recognize the poor as a very important part of the world, but the Church does not recognize itself in the poor, and the poor do not recognize Christ in the Church ... The Church which is not the Church of the poor puts in serious jeopardy its churchly character.

The foregoing demonstrates that ecumenical concern with the poor does not merely belong to the realm of the social responsibility of the church; rather it is a matter of ecclesiology. Bonino (1975, 42) was deeply perceptive in this regard when he observed that the neat distinction made within the WCC hitherto, between "Faith and Order," "Church and Society," CCPD and CICARWS were "at least a little questionable from a theological point of view." Nevertheless, it is farfetched to claim that these debates led to a consensus on a "theology of development" (see Itty 1974, 16). By the time of the WCC Assembly in Nairobi (1975), the CCDP stressed the view of development as "a liberating process aimed at social justice, self-reliance and economic growth." Between the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, the WCC linked *diakonia* intimately with *koinonia* (see Nalwamba and Sakupapa 2016, 85). More recently, an understanding of *diakonia* as an integral dimension of the ecumenical movement has been underscored and found expression at the WCC Assembly held in Busan, Korea in 2013 (see Senturias and Gill 2014, 244).[8] Such a perspective sees *diakonia* as part of the nature and mission of the church within the framework of the pilgrimage of justice and peace. The joint WCC, Lutheran World Federation and ACT Alliance document, "Called to Transformative Action, Ecumenical Diakonia"[9] is a latest exploration of ecumenical *diakonia*.

Discourse on Development in the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC 1963–2000)

The initial institutionalisation of the AACC's concern with development advanced in close collaboration with some of the WCC initiatives highlighted above. However, this is not to suggest that the WCC is a norm setter for the AACC. As one recent study on the AACC demonstrates, social issues in the African context have often prompted theological developments in the AACC (Sakupapa 2017). Since the late 1960s, the profile of reflection on development within the AACC interacted with both secular and wider ecumenical discourse on development including the social analysis of liberation theology. A deep awareness of the theoretical reorientations of the aims of development from the narrow focus

7 See for example Gutiérrez's *The Power of the Poor in History*.

8 For useful background to WCC discourse on ecumenical diakonia see a special issue of *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 46 (3) on "Ecumenical Diakonia: New Challenges, New Responses."

9 Document available at https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2018/documents/ecumenical-diakonia-document-en.pdf (accessed 22/07/18).

on economic growth, to the concerns for human well-being and environmental sustainability—and more recently to a focus on sustainable development with its triple emphasis on social, economic and environmental dimensions of development—is discernible in the history of the AACC for the period covered.

In Search of a Viable Theology of Development

The first explicit concern regarding development within the AACC was at its Abidjan Assembly (1969). In search of a viable theology of development, the Abidjan Assembly issued a statement on development and appealed to the doctrine of creation as a theological warrant. The Assembly affirmed that "All men [sic] are created in the image of God, are equal before Him, and are each entitled to a share of the world's wealth according to their needs, and are stewards of the same" (AACC 1970, 108). This affirmation reflects a widely shared conviction at the Assembly, namely that "in dealing with the problem of development, the church must have a vision that is rooted in biblical theology" (AACC 1970, 107). Abidjan thus understood the church in relation to development as representing a moral and spiritual force that must have its effect on human life (AACC 1970, 108).

Development as Liberation

The AACC's next Assembly at Lusaka (1974) echoed Abidjan's concern with a "theology of development." This found expression in the address to the Assembly by the then General Secretary of the AACC, Burgess Carr, who observed that one area in which there was urgent need to work out a clear theology was in the area of development (see AACC 1975, 79). The Assembly couched its deliberations in this regard on a prophetic understanding of the church. Thus, in a statement on "The Prophetic and Serving Church," the Assembly appealed to creation (view of human persons) as a theological warrant for the churches' involvement in development. Describing the mission of the church as prophetic, the Assembly affirmed that in serving, the church could accomplish its mission "by being engaged, involved and sensitive to the well-being of the society" (AACC 1975, 38). The Assembly further noted the integral relation between development and the search for justice and between unity and justice.[10] This was necessary, given widespread disillusionment across the continent amidst the economic slump and growing indebtedness that characterised most post-colonial African states from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. This was compounded by widespread corruption in African states, the emergence of oppressive regimes that violated human rights, and liberation struggles in southern Africa—most notably the struggle against apartheid in South Africa (Sakupapa 2017, 139).

Such a context impelled a focus on the liberative dimension of theology within the AACC. The Lusaka Assembly sharpened this focus, given the attention devoted to the concept of liberation in the spiritual, political, educational, social and ecclesiastical spheres. Burgess Carr highlighted the ecumenical significance of this concern when he articulated the interrelation between "the struggle for justice and reconciliation in the world" and "the call to

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10 See for example the publication AACC 1975. "Structures of Injustice: A Report of a Consultation on Violations of Human Rights, Held in Khartoum, Sudan, from 16–22 February, 1975." Nairobi: AACC.

unity among Christians" (AACC 1975, 77). Accordingly, the struggle against racism and apartheid, tribalism and colonialism were not viewed as external to the demands of the gospel for unity. Consequently, the AACC confirmed its commitment to the WCC Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) and later jointly sponsored a consultation on the liberation of southern Africa at Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation, Kitwe, Zambia, in November 1976, together with the WCC PCR (AACC 1975, 39). The AACC Bulletin soon included various contributions on liberation theology. These and other examples show that the struggle for liberation, justice and reconciliation in southern Africa became a priority of the AACC after the Lusaka Assembly (see *Pro Veritate* 1974, 14).

Social Transformation as a Concept of Development

Following the precedent set by Lusaka, the next Assembly at Nairobi (1981) recommended the need for the AACC to emphasise economic liberation (AACC 1982, 70). This Assembly employed commendable social analysis evident in deliberations and recommendations on various socio-economic issues, militarisation, contemporary ideological battles (between capitalism and socialism), and on marginalised groups in society—including women, the youth, childless women, prostitutes and refugees (see Utuk 1997, 150). The Assembly issued a statement on development entitled "The Gospel and Education for Liberation." Notwithstanding the focus of the statement on economic justice, the Assembly did not go beyond the discussion of development within the rubric of the prophetic ministry of the church as a consideration for the theological basis of the churches' engagement with development.

Following a recommendation of the Nairobi Assembly for the establishment of a department responsible for development problems (see AACC 1982, 72), the AACC created the Research and Development Consultancy Service (RDCS) in 1982 as an institutional expression of its concern with development issues on the continent. This would soon prove an important development, given the attention which the AACC placed on the burning issues of militarisation, the food crisis, human development, the refugee problem, and the conflict in Sudan (see Sakupapa 2017, 95). The main aim of RDCS at inception was to assist AACC member churches in development activities that foster people's participation. It also provided advisory and consultancy services to member churches in addition to organising and coordinating ecumenical joint ventures and training programmes for development. Through its Baobab-for-network newsletter, the RDCS soon engaged in action research. According to the RDCS (1986, 13):

> … the assumption of knowledge under action research is that people, regardless of educational levels and occupation, possess important practical and empirical knowledge that allows them to operate in their current environments. The task of the researchers then becomes not to produce knowledge, but to facilitate the construction of knowledge by the community itself.

Through the RDCS, the AACC played the role of facilitating exchange of information and experiences on development work among churches. Increasingly, the notion of social transformation was employed as a concept of development. Alongside this was work

conducted by the AACC Refugee Department. Notwithstanding the institutional challenges that the AACC was facing during this period—especially after the resignation of Burgess Carr as General Secretary in March 1978—development became one of the central thrusts in the AACC programmatic arrangement.

The Interdependence of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

The Lomé Assembly (1987) met at a time when the AACC faced a serious institutional crisis characterised by bankruptcy and low staff morale at its headquarters in Nairobi, following the dismissal of its General Secretary, Maxime Ranfrasoa, amidst concerns about a huge financial deficit (see Sakupapa 2017, 169–170). Further, given economic woes and abuse of power that characterised most African governments at the time, the Assembly accordingly gave attention to widespread disillusionment with political independence (AACC 1988, 77). The Assembly met at a time when the hunger problem had especially intensified in the period 1984–1985, when Africa suffered one of the worst food crises ever, affecting about 26 African countries. Understandably, the theme of liberation remained central in the Assembly deliberations. Prior to Lomé, the AACCs RDCS Report on the *Root Causes of Hunger and Food Insufficiency in Africa* (AACC 1986) criticised the African churches' dependence on foreign assistance and observed that "the international link alone produced structural relationships internally that reproduce poverty and underdevelopment" (AACC 1986, 40). The Lomé Assembly viewed the churches' involvement in development as part of their Christian witness. The Assembly passed a resolution that emphasised that "Christians should see it as their responsibility to fully participate in the social, political and economic life of their country" (AACC 1988, 114). Christian witness as involvement in development was seen to have an ecumenical dimension insofar as collaboration in development potentially provided opportunities for the practice of ecumenism (AACC 1988, 58). Further, the development was discussed in relation to human rights, the environment, and the oppressed—including women and youth given their exclusion from mainstream development efforts (see AACC 1988, 51, 59). Therefore, delegates emphasised the interdependence of justice, peace and integrity of creation. Lomé's discussion on development thus prompted concern for the ecology, given the negative effects of some technologies on the environment.

The Church as Power of Advocacy

After the Lomé Assembly, AACC programmes were "development oriented" (AACC 1994, 69). The Harare Assembly (1992) was a watershed in the AACC's theological approach to issues facing the church and society in Africa. The Assembly was preceded by three important AACC initiatives, including an AACC executive meeting in 1990 at which Jesse Mugambi proposed the African theology of reconstruction.[11] The next was a symposium on "Problems and Promises of the Church in Africa" held in Mombasa, Kenya in 1991. The other initiative was an RDCS-commissioned study on "The Receding Role of the State in African Development and Emerging Role of NGOs" conducted between 1991 and 1993.

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11 Theologically, it would seem that it was a 1983 working session of the RDCS that became formative for the AACC's focus on development. See RDCS 1983. "Churches' Commitment to Development: What is our Imperative? Report of the Working Session Held in Harare, Zimbabwe (9–17 May 1983)." Nairobi: AACC.

Results of this project included the publication of *Emerging Power of Civil Society in Africa* (1992) edited by Chanya Mwaikio-Blumenkrantz and Mosi Kisare, and a final report of the study namely "Civil Society, the State and African Development in the 1990s" (1993) edited by Nyang'oro. Given these developments as well as the emerging role of NGOs in development efforts in Africa during the 1990s, the Harare Assembly (1994) spoke of the church as power of advocacy and pondered on what it means to speak of the church as part of civil society. Ecclesiologically, this begged further questions regarding the church's self-understanding vis-à-vis civil society (AACC 1994, 31). In his report to the Assembly, the then General Secretary of the AACC, José Chipenda, noted the need to consider the struggle for democracy as one of the key concerns constituting the mandate of the AACC in the post-Harare period (AACC 1994, 67). The Assembly delegates affirmed that "direct and organised participation in civic affairs" belongs to the mission of the church in society. The AACC thus became increasingly involved in issues of democratisation, participation in civil society and human rights and encouraged member churches to develop civil education programmes. Consequently, democracy became part of the AACCs formal mandate in the period after the Harare Assembly (1992–1997).

The AACC organised a number of conferences, including one on "The Role of Religious Leaders in Peace Making and Social Change in Africa" in July 1993 in Nyeri, Kenya. Another conference was held on "Democratisation and Development" in Bujumbura, Burundi from 23–26 August 1993. In August 1994, a major consultation was held on democratisation and democracy in Nairobi, Kenya from 1–5 August 1994.[12] The consultation issued a call to churches with recommendations that spelt out concrete steps that churches could take in contributing towards social development (Mugambi 1997, 43). The call also highlighted the potential of ecumenical unity for adding a moral tone to political imperatives in the realm of social development.

The AACC further offered solidarity with and for the actions of its member churches nationally and mobilised member churches to encourage Christian civic engagement. The debate on the relationship between the concepts of civil society and social capital is instructive on this point (see Smidt 2003, 3). The churches generated social capital that in turn had a role in shaping civic engagement as far as democracy is concerned. Several influential studies underscore this point (see De Gruchy 1995, 175–182; Gifford 1995, 8–10; Sakupapa 2017, 199). According to Gibbs and Ajulu (1999, 82) for instance, the success of the advocacy role of churches in democracy in countries such as Kenya, Malawi and Zambia is owing to:

> … the authority and legitimacy of the churches; the national-level linkages between churches and other institutions; the links churches have internationally, and the skill and capacity of individuals within the churches and ecumenical bodies to engage in advocacy work at the national level.

12 The report the consultation was published as *Democracy and Development in Africa: The Role of Churches,* edited by Jesse Mugambi (1997).

Michael Woolcock's (2001, 13–14) differentiation of three types of social capital, namely bonding, bridging and linking, is useful in this regard. Bridging capital refers to similar links across religious groups. Linking social capital refers to "norms and trusting networks between individuals/groups across explicit, and usually institutionalised, gradients of power or authority" (Maselko et al. 2011, 761). Through a religious social capital lens, it may be argued that bridging and linking social capital overlapped as local churches collaborated through National Councils of Churches and further with continental bodies like the AACC. Religious social capital is here defined as "the social resources available to individuals and groups through their social connections with a religious community" (Maselko et al. 2011, 760). Given the role of church doctrine, the nature of religious social capital may be distinct from the social capital generated from other forms of association (Smidt 2003, 3). This begs further reflection on the self-understanding of the AACC.

The Church and the Reconstruction of Africa

The contribution of the AACC in social capital formation was further illumined in light of the paradigm of the African theology of reconstruction that served as the mandate of the AACC for nearly 20 years.[13] By the time of the AACC Addis Ababa Assembly in 1997, the paradigm of reconstruction had become a central theological theme within the AACC. The Kenyan theologian, Jesse Mugambi, originally proposed the theology of reconstruction in his reflection on the "Future of the Church and the Church of the Future in Africa" which he presented at the AACC Central Committee meeting on 30 March 1990. Therein, Mugambi argued that "we need to shift our theological gear from Liberation to Reconstruction" (see Chipenda et al. 1991, 35). These views were subsequently developed in his *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Mugambi 1995).[14] Mugambi's (1995, 165) concern with the blatant contradiction between the numerical growth of Christianity in Africa and the social economic challenges facing the continent prompted his call for African theologians, churches and the AACC to shift from the theological occupation with liberation to reconstruction. He wondered why the most religious continent in the world would "be abandoned by God to perish in poverty, in debt and under the yoke of the great powers of the world?" (Mugambi 1995, 163)

While scholarly reflection and critique of the African theology of reconstruction is well documented (see Maluleke 1994; Sakupapa 2017, 205–214), its ecumenical origins and significance within the AACC have received less emphasis. The theology of reconstruction, as it found expression within the AACC through its conferences, workshops and prominently in Mugambi's publications, was articulated within an understanding of the church in Africa as one of the most influential and sustainable social institutions—especially in rural areas. The church was portrayed as the "facilitator of social transformation" (Mugambi 1995, 17). Such a sociological notion of ecclesiology was framed within an understanding that African

13 For burgeoning perspectives on reconstruction theology presented by various AACC staff at a workshop held in Tanzania in 1993, see *African Church in the 21st Century: Challenges and Promises* (Waruta, Douglas W. 1995).

14 In response to various critiques of his original postulation, Mugambi later revised some of his views in *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Mugambi 2003).

theology in the twenty-first century would be characterised by the themes of social transformation and reconstruction (Mugambi 1995, 40).

Little wonder that in preparation for its Addis Ababa Assembly (1997), the AACC published three books edited by Jesse Mugambi aimed at stimulating further theological reflection on reconstruction.[15] The Addis Ababa Assembly discussed key issues related to political and socio-economic concerns. The Assembly was punctuated with various perspectives on the plight of Africa. A key aspect that received attention in this regard pertained to the debt burden. The assembly urged AACC member churches and NCCs to commit themselves to "advocate for debt cancellation in accordance with the biblical jubilee principle" (AACC 1997, 220). This was clearly a concern for economic justice.[16]

A Critique of AACC Discourse on Development

In the foregoing, I highlighted various aspects of the AACC developmental efforts and underscored its role in social capital formation. However, at a deeper level of analysis, those efforts remained theologically ambiguous. Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole's (2011, 33) identification of three paradigms of the African churches' quest for social relevance and political performance, namely the political (advocacy and mediation), spiritual (spiritual formation), and the pastoral (social material intervention) is highly instructive in this regard. These entail realising Christian responsibility by directly influencing government policy (political paradigm); indirectly by motivating or infusing Christian action in the world through love (spiritual paradigm); or in partnership with the nation-state through relief services (pastoral approach). Of these, he suggests that the political paradigm is prominent in ecumenical organisations such as the AACC. Following Katongole, one may argue that AACC discourse has not sufficiently focused on how reflections on development may find expression and embodiment in the practices of the local churches. Secondly, there seems to be a lack of focus on local epistemologies of development. Could there be alternative development discourses? This is particularly crucial given the postcolonial neo-colonised context in which Africa finds itself. Here, the African discourse on decoloniality is helpful, given its call for a shift in the geography and biography of thinking about development. From a theological point of view, there is need for further reflection on the role of African Christian spirituality and rituals in development. These concerns are addressed at length in a sequel to this contribution.

Conclusion

This contribution has underscored the crucial role of the ecumenical movement in Africa in social capital formation. It has demonstrated how the AACC engaged in development efforts and the framing of such concern in terms of the prophetic role of the church. Through an analysis of AACC Assembly documents, it was argued that development has been a crucial

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15 These are *The Church and the Future of Africa* (1997), *Democracy and Development in Africa* (1997), and *The Church and Reconstruction of Africa* (1997).

16 An AACC Conference on "The Question of Debt as it Affects Human Rights" held at Maseru, Lesotho in September 1990 urged the AACC to call for a year of Jubilee (see AACC 1990, Maseru Declaration).

ecumenical concern in the AACC since its Abidjan Assembly in 1969. It was further argued that while the AACC has not hitherto developed any theology of development, its involvement in development was infused with theological considerations very often captured in terms of the public role of the church in society. Such a focus on a prophetic role of the church in society has led to the privileging of the view that the AACC plays an advocacy role. Indeed, this has potential to influence political and social processes in Africa and through its member churches on national political and economic processes. However, as Kobia (2003, 135) observes, "although much has been achieved in terms of high profile advocacy through ecumenical initiatives … the ecumenical movement [in Africa] has yet to provide much needed leadership in the theological understanding of advocacy and translation of such understanding into the life of the church." A sequel to the current publication offers a robust treatment of this concern against the background of theological debates on decoloniality.

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