

# Theological basis of community development: A public inquiry from a practical theological view

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Development has become a central topic in theological discussions on a global scale. Poverty and underdevelopment have been the subject of ongoing discussion in theological circles over the role of the churches in addressing these issues. Hence, the controversy regarding theology and progress has emerged. While it has been widely understood in theological discussions that theology must confront public challenges, few works have evaluated the grounds that compel a theological reflection on development. To this purpose, there is a crucial point that must be investigated about theology and development: how substantial are the arguments for the theology and development debate? Furthermore, how are such arguments biblically supported? This essay evaluates the arguments for a theology of development through the lens of public practical theology in order to provide answers to the problems posed above. Through literary analysis, the study proceeds to analyse the basis for theology and development from a biblical perspective, so demonstrating that God's aim for his creation is development that strikes a balance between economic, environmental, and social elements. This article contributes to the conversation of the necessity of theological reflection on development.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article contributes to the discussion between theological disciplines and development studies to provide a greater understanding of the significance of this debate to the church's engagement with public issues such as development. The findings of this study are unquestionably valuable for churches in developing a public practical theology and enriching theological thought and church practice through community development.

**Keywords:** theology; theology and development; development; community development; public practical theology; church.

## Introduction

There has been a tremendous increase in the perceived importance of development in theological discourse over the past two decades. Development studies have become an integral part of the theological discourse on a national and international scale (Klaasen 2013:182; Swart 2010:205). The focus on development in theological circles has been motivated by the recent realisation by important international development institutions such as the World Bank on the high impact of religious agency in the context of global development (Koehrsen & Heuser 2020:1). While for a long time, due to the impact of modernisation theory, religion was viewed as an enemy of development (Adogame 2016:1; Lunn 2009:937), nevertheless, the recent shift in focus has replaced such theories by supporting the transformative potentials of religion hence making religious discourse integral to the discussion and implementation of development (Adedibu 2020:136; Bompani 2012:307–330; Schnable 2016:216–232). The gaining of recognition of religion in development research, practise and programming is the evidence of its earnest and insistent necessity (Marshall 2021; Öhlmann, Frost & Grab 2016; Selinger 2004; Ver Beek 2000). Despite the recognition of the vital role religion plays in development, there is a need to examine the theological arguments for a theology of development. The reason for such examination is to substantiate the involvement of churches in public issues, in particular community development.

To contribute to the subject of theology and development, this article presents a discussion on the subject by assessing the theological and biblical foundations of the topic, thus clarifying why churches should involve themselves in community development. The presentation is not a systematic theological discussion on the topic of development, but rather an assessment of the

validity of arguments for a theology and development debate. This will be achieved by firstly presenting the brief discussion on the history of theological reflection on development. Secondly, the discussion on theology and development will be presented. Thirdly, the definition of theology will be given to help showing the link between theology and development.

Fourthly, some biblical concepts of development will be considered from both the Old and New Testaments. Lastly, the article will highlight the implications of the theology and development debate to community development.

## Brief history of theology and development debates

While theology and development issues may have existed since the beginning of the church, Swart (2010:209), citing Rendtorff's essays, claims that the church's involvement with development issues originated specifically from two significant ecumenical conferences held in Geneva and Uppsala in 1966 and 1968, respectively<sup>1</sup>. The Geneva conference was characterised by scepticism because it revealed the problematic nature of progress. Swart (2010) emphasises the following:

Although the problematic nature of development already dominated proceedings at Geneva, the discussions were still couched within the conceptual and ideological framework of the so-called 'theology of revolution'. Thus, the catchword was still 'revolution' and the churches centred their practical and theological focus on the idea of revolution. (p. 209)

'Theology of revolution' arose in the context of attempting to bring change in society by means of revolution to remove the root causes of injustice that had led to domination and dependence – oppression of the poor by the rich dominant class (Bosch 1991:434–434). Theology of revolution also challenged development's modernisation-theory-influenced universalism for assuming Western economic models and social structures as the normative ground and ends of the transformation of non-Western cultures (Klaasen 2013:2; Öhlmann et al. 2022:5). While the World Conference on Church and Society (Geneva conference) was characterised by the problematic nature of development, the Uppsala World Council of Churches Conference (Uppsala conference) changed the focus from a potential theology of revolution to a theology of development (Klaasen 2013:2; Öhlmann et al. 2022:5). Even if this shift did not imply a rejection of the demand for social change intrinsic to the idea of revolution, the emphasis on 'development' rather than 'social change' was perceived as a more comprehensive term that represented something inclusive of, but not limited to social change. The idea of development was regarded as more realistic and more complete than the idea of revolution, according to the

1. It is very important to note that while 'theology and development' (TD) as a field was initiated and popularised by Steve De Gruchy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in the late 1990s, the concept was already in use before this time and has also been known as 'theology of development', 'developmental theology model', and 'theologised development' (Gathogo 2019). Bowers Du Toit (2016:1) also recognises that the field is often associated with other terms such as 'diakonia', 'integral mission', and 'transformational development'.

practical reality, because it offered people the drive to envision, plan, think positively, and consciously ratify the change. At the Uppsala conference, World Economic and Social Development was given its section (Bosch 2011:444). It became clear that the ecumenical movement gave development a high priority with the creation of the 'Society, Development, and Peace' committee (SODEPAX) by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace (Klaasen 2013:182). A fresh approach to the church's involvement in the existential and structural problem of poverty was developed in the ecumenical view of development. However, some objected to this and, according to Swart (2010:210), disapproved of the focus on defining development in terms of the complete or integral freedom of the human being. While development cannot entirely be defined in terms of the freedom of the human being, nevertheless, a certain perspective on development can and should be grounded on a such view as Amartya Sen (1999) explains in his book entitled: *Development as Freedom*. Even though this latter group did not want to give up the principles of a humanistic perspective, which must logically qualify the ultimate objective or outcome of an authentic development process, it was noted that such a broad term of reference also robbed the word of any specific and practical meaning.

There has predictably been significant theological interest in questions of development in the South African context given that local churches and civil society in general play a crucial role in development (Klaasen 2013:183). Theological analysis of development has become more prevalent during the 1990s in a variety of settings. Firstly, by the early 1990s, there had been a diversity of perspectives on community development in several missiological contributions, especially those from within reformed churches. The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and the Diens Van Barmhartigheid were instances of Reformed congregations in 1990 that helped shape perspectives on the church and development (Klaasen 2013:183).

Klaasen (2013) put forward that following the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Plan in the mid-1990s, the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, led by Renier Koegelenberg, published several edited volumes and booklets as a result of a series of conferences on church and development as follows: *Church and Development: An Interdisciplinary Approach: Perspectives from Southern Africa and Europe* (1992); *The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP): The Role of the Church; Civil Society and NGO's: Report to the Third Church and Development Programme* (1995); and a different publication also titled: *The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP): The Role of the Church, Civil Society and NGO's: Report to the Third Church and Development Programme* (1995) are some of these (Klaasen 2013:183).

Under the direction of the late Professor Steve De Gruchy, the University of KwaZulu-Natal established a *Theology and Development Programme* in the mid-1990s to address issues of social transformation from a Christian theological perspective (Gathogo 2019:313; Haddad 2016:2). Following his death in 2010, Professor Beverly Haddad and Dr. Clint le

Bruyns continued this work. Since around 2005, Stellenbosch University has developed several programmes and research initiatives focused on congregational growth and community development (Klaasen 2013:183). Furthermore, Ignatius Swart edited several books, including *The Churches and the Development Debate: The Promise of a Fourth Generation Approach* (2000); *Welfare, Religion, and Gender in Post-Apartheid South Africa – Constructing a South-North Dialogue* (SUN Press, 2010); and *Religion and Social Development in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (SUN Press, 2010; Klaasen 2013:183).

As a result, the primary goal of a theology of development was to equip churches to engage in development praxis that was sensitive to modern-day life challenges. It meant that a theology of development should be situated within the framework of development theory (Haddad 2016:1; Swart 2010:212). This viewpoint reemphasised the strategic value of theological education. It presented churches and their theologians with a dual challenge: on the one hand, to gain an objective understanding of the complex issues related to development and, as a result, to actively participate in the process of development research; on the other hand, to form an opinion and persuade congregations about the importance of churches participating in development initiatives based on such an inquiry (Swart 2010:212).

## Why should theology involve development?

The theology and development discussion was birthed as a result of understanding that there is more that churches can do to help with the issues of poverty and underdevelopment than just being involved in charitable works (Bowers Du Toit 2016:1; Haddad 2016:2; Looft 2014:5; Sugden 2010:31). Among other scholars, De Gruchy (2003), Bowers Du Toit (2012), and Swart (2003, 2006) have questioned the notion that churches can address poverty and underdevelopment by merely providing basic needs such as food, clothing and support for welfare organisations like old age homes and orphanages to ease the plight of those impoverished. Discourses on theology and development make an effort to reflect theologically on the social problems that the continent of Africa is facing, with a focus on systematic injustices and the role that faith communities can play in resolving these injustices (Haddad 2016:2; Kim 2017:40–60; Magezi 2019a:1). Sugden (2010) points out the need for the church's involvement in society to go beyond charity when he asserted that:

... mission as transformation is rooted deeper in the nature of the kingdom of God, the nature of human persons as stewards and moral beings, the atonement of Jesus addressing sin, evil and fate, and the work of the Holy Spirit empowering people and communities to move in the direction of the hope God provides. (p. 31)

For Sugden (2010), transformation (and by implication development) involves confronting sin which is the cause of oppression and makes people live their lives in an undesirable state. Development should also involve empowering people to deal with the evils that they are facing (Sugden 2010).

Africa as a continent is faced by numerous challenges that impede transformation of people's lives. The World Bank (2018:3) and Myers (2017:149), note that Africa (particularly sub-Saharan Africa [SSA]) has been challenged by ongoing fragility, conflict, weak institutions, lack of success in channelling growth into poverty reduction, wars, hunger, etc. Indicators of underdevelopment that Augustine (2018:6) cites as being blatantly apparent in SSA include low gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, a preponderance of subpar technology, weak economic and political institutions, a lack of political culture, the predominance of a ruling class that emphasises and justifies values at odds with socioeconomic and political development and fragile statehood. Does theology have answers to the issues and challenges that nations on planet earth are facing? Challenges of poverty, climate and environmental changes, health, technology, war and conflict, migration, rapid urbanisation, and democratic disorder, gender-based violence (GBV), unemployment, effects of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), and rampant corruption in governments, just to mention a few. The answer to the above question is closely linked to the discourses about theology and development as Swart (2010) points out in the context of South Africa:

In post-apartheid South Africa a debate on church and development<sup>2</sup> has come to be at the centre of theological inquiry about the deep-rooted problems of poverty and underdevelopment in the country. It is especially through this debate that it is expected of the discipline of theology to empower the churches to make a meaningful contribution toward solving these problems. (p. 216)

Swart (2010:206) acknowledges Lategan's contributions, who argued that theological conversations must seriously consider the issue of the discourse style or mode that would be necessary to effectively engage in the domain of the third public,<sup>3</sup> also known as a wider society or civil society. According to Lategan (1995:225), in the context of South Africa, the third public discourse would proactively address the fresh opportunities and difficulties that society presents, with a focus on the need to contribute to the formation of new public ethos in civil society. Lategan (1995:220) further emphasises the crucial importance of the third public by asserting that it is the litmus test for the contribution that theology is claiming to be able to make and that many people are expecting theology to make. This is the area that, to a considerable part, will determine theology's future and the role it is likely to play in a new and fundamentally different society, no matter how essential other responsibilities and difficulties may be.

Prior to Lategan's article in 1995, some parts of the faith communities and religious leaders in the context of apartheid in South Africa had deeply engaged in reflections in reading the signs of the times and challenging theologians to take seriously the experience of the poor and the oppressed

2. Swart uses church and development to imply theology and development (see Swart 2010:208).

3. According to Tracy (1981:3–46), there are three distinct publics of theology, which include the academy, the church, and society at large. Hence, the third public involves theology and social issues.

(Haddad 2016:2). As a result, the Kairos Document was published in 1985 by Kairos Theologians. Haddad (2016:3) outlines three ways the Kairos Document had a crucial role in the concretisation of theology.

Firstly, the Kairos Document challenged theologians to prioritise the lived experiences of the poor and the marginalised, recognising that they are the primary theological interlocutors and that, as a result, it is important to view God and his work in the world from their point of view. Secondly, the Kairos Document showed the importance of social analysis. In order to understand the systemic nature of injustice, we must first engage in a thorough social analysis in conversation with those on the margins of society. To do this, we must use the social sciences' resources to examine the social, economic and political forces that are at play in our society. Then and only then can we start to interpret this analysis using a theological framework. This is what it means to 'read the signs of the times' (Haddad 2016:3). Thirdly, is the prophetic nature of theology to bring radical social transformation. This implies that in addition to interpreting the signs of the times through social analysis, we also need to publicly interpret them in light of God. This prophetic forewarning reaches a turning point that summons the church to repentance. Social transformation is possible if this appeal is answered.

In order to effectively achieve the proposal that the Kairos Document outlined above, according to Swart (2010:216), the transformation or change of people's lives is a highly complicated social issue that calls for exceptionally advanced conceptual and strategic thinking. As it is evident, the churches lack the necessary skills to address the intricate, varied and wide-ranging difficulties that the transformation of people demands (Janse Van Rensburg & Breed 2011:2). They can only contribute minimally to the task at hand. Any development initiatives solely carried out by the churches would be either conceited or naive. Cooperation with all social, governmental and international organisations working on development is necessary here, more than in any place. Reaching consensus on the purpose and content of development in a framework that is accessible to everyone and understood by everyone is crucial given the urgency of cooperation. Therefore, the human foundation and intent behind development activity must also provide the framework for its theological interpretation.

Balcomb (2012) critiques the approach that theology and development discourses take as far as theological engagement is concerned. In his article titled, 'What theology? Whose development? – Interrogating theology and development in secular academy', he (Balcomb 2012) calls attention to the scanty theological engagement in doctoral theses in the area presented at the University of KwaZulu-Natal between 1995 and 2009 challenging their bending towards social sciences more than theology. Bowers Du Toit (2016) concurs with Balcomb in recognising the primary issue stated in the paper, stating that:

... This is indeed also true of the two dominant approaches previously mentioned, namely the 'charity and welfare' and 'pragmatic' approaches. However, there are many root causes behind an insufficiently thought through discourse. For not only do the theological discourses that shape these approaches have theologically shallow roots, but they could also be regarded as 'weak' in their acknowledgement of power. (p. 4)

One way Haddad (2016) responds to Balcomb's concerns is by asserting that the church is a social organisation that has been used for both good and harm; and that theology as a discipline is a contested field that takes into account the differing ideologies of various groups. In addition, Haddad (2016:6) argues that theology and development discourse should include a prophetic theology in the vein of the Kairos Document. She (Haddad) made the point that using the instruments of the social sciences is essential for tearing down the unfair systems that exist both inside the church and within the larger structures of economic and political power on a global scale. Thus, Haddad defends the inclusion of social sciences in theology pointing that it is not to theology's demise, rather to its advantage.

It is in the understanding of the overall purpose of God for his creation that the discussion of development in theological arenas is not alien. According to Magezi and Nanthambwe (2022:3), one of the most heartening changes in the Christian church has been the expansion of the idea of holistic, or integral mission, where God has commanded his church to address all facets of life: the material, the emotional, the environmental, as well as the spiritual (Magezi & Mutowa 2018:124; Myers 2017:93).

## The definition of theology

It is imperative to define theology to lay a foundation for the discussion of theology and development (as it is going to help assess whether the debate on theology and development has anything to do with theology per se). What is theology? Traditionally, theology has been defined as 'the art and science of the study of God' (Agang 2020:7). Agang (2020:7) indicates that this approach to theology needs to be rethought since it limits theology to the discussion of dogmas and doctrines, which are largely inapplicable to African struggles. In his definition of theology, Erickson (2007:17) defines theology as 'a discipline of study that seeks to understand the God revealed in the Bible and to provide a Christian understanding of reality'. However, Erickson (2007:17) and Agang (2020:8) went on to say that theology attempts to understand God's creation, and at the top of God's creation are humans, and theology seeks to debate their position and how God has redeemed them. God created the world for a reason. He made people in his likeness and assigned them to maintain order in the cosmos. Theology attempts to make sense of the world and human experience in that there is a unified purpose underlying creation (Rm 11:36) (Agang 2020:8; Wright 2010:53). This understanding of theology is similar to Pope John Paul II's emphasis on the importance of theology encompassing all aspects of human life. According

to Pope John Paul (1991) 'the theological dimension is needed both for interpreting and solving present-day problems in human society'. As a result, theology is more than just throwing around some vague ideas about God. It needs to land and talk about humanity and how it can thrive on earth. As a necessary consequence, Juma (2015:1) sees a link between theology and human lives. According to Hendriks (2010:276) and Bosch (1991:389–393) theology, by definition, is contextual and missional. This implies that theology needs to be understood in the context of people's culture and also that theology must accomplish something in peoples' lives. If theology is to be valid, it must address societal issues and problems. Otherwise, it is pointless and ineffective.

As a result, a theology that is practical to people's lives has the following elements. To begin with, theology is concerned with God (Hendriks 2010:278–280). Theology must first understand who God is and what his will is for people and all of creation (Agang 2020:8; Franke 2020:1; Hendriks 2010:279; Newbiggin 1993:28–29). Theology must recognise that God is a missional being (Franke 2020:6; Moltmann 1993:64). According to Bosch (1991:399), mission is not primarily a church activity, but rather a divine attribute. Jurgen Moltmann (1993:64) echoes Bosch's statement by emphasising that mission is God's activity, thus defining him as a missional God.

Secondly, theology is concerned with the church (Hendriks 2010:280). God established relationships that humanity needed to cherish when he created man in his image (Gn 1:26–28). Humanity's first relationship was with God; thus, humans were to worship their creator God. The second relationship was between humans; Adam and Eve were to represent human relationships, albeit in the context of marriage. The third relationship was that which existed between humanity and creation. Human beings were to be stewards of the earth. According to The Baptist World Aid (n.d.:3), while the life, death and resurrection of Jesus have restored the right relationship between God and humanity, God's larger mission to communities and creation is carried out through a variety of agents including the government, households, individuals and the church.

Thirdly, theology is concerned with the world (Hendriks 2010:281). Understanding what is happening in the world and being able to provide solutions should be the goals of theology (Osmer 2008:4, 34). The Bible makes it abundantly plain that when things went wrong in Genesis 3, God still loved the world. To save the world, He dispatched His Son (Jn 3:16). This atonement applies to the present as well as the past (Corbett & Fikkert 2012:32, 33). As it provides answers to people's inquiries about the world that God has loved, theology should be relevant. What is happening here? is one topic that theologians need to address. What should we do when something catches our attention? Or how ought we to respond to anything that comes our way (Hendriks 2010:282; Osmer 2008:4)?

Fourthly, theology is concerned with the word (Hendriks 2010:283). Hermeneutics is required for theology (Ganzevoort 2009:5, 6; Hendriks 2010:283; Musa 2020:27, 28). Interpreting what is stated in normative sources like the Bible, creeds and Christian tradition entails hermeneutics, which aims to make sense of these sources in light of peoples' circumstances (Hendriks 2010:283). As a result, the church's response to events in the world is guided by the Bible.

Finally, theology is concerned with mission (Hendriks 2010:283). People need to be taught through missionary efforts that sin is what has caused the world to be in the condition that it is. But now, thanks to the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ at the cross, God has reconciled the world and dealt with the effects of sin (Sugden 2010:31). Through faith and repentance, people can experience liberation from the shackling influence of sin and better their current realities while they wait for the full redemption when Christ returns. The Kingdom of God has come. Mission extends beyond only educating individuals for the future. It is also a call to assist individuals in reaching a position of freedom where they can worship their creator and have the power of the Holy Spirit transform their present (Samuel 2010:129; Vorster 2017:17; Welker 2013:209). There are many difficulties that the world must overcome. A few examples include coronavirus disease 2019, war, poverty and fear of the future due to nuclear threats. People become disenchanted as a result of all of these. Many people have little hope for the future. There is no need to do theology if it is completed without addressing these global problems.

Theology is also about making decisions and taking action (Hendriks 2010:284). According to Hendriks (2010:283), the church must engage in an open and constructive conversation of discernment that hermeneutically connects the following to effectively participate in God's missional praxis:

- the identity of the people of God;
- their role and purpose, or mission, which flows from their knowledge of Scripture and tradition; and
- a contextual situation with its problems and challenges.

To receive advice from God on how to address the issues people are encountering in their communities, the theologian continually discern guidance from the word and the Holy Spirit. Theology should address current issues because God revealed through his Son Jesus Christ that he cares deeply about the difficulties his people experience and has not allowed them to deal with them on their own. Instead, he took on flesh and delivered his people from their problems (Ac 10:38). Ward (2000:95) makes an intriguing remark regarding theology and contemplation (discernment). He claimed that engaging in theological inquiry is enormously beneficial. Every theologian recognises that theology is more than just what is written about some doctrine in books. Theology, on the other hand, should compel theologians to think theologically about practise. Theological discernment is where the rubber hits the road (Ward 2000). Through

discernment or reflection in doing theology, one moves from reading what others have said and critiquing the theories in textbooks to doing, thus, practical theology (Ward 2000).

To summarise the discussion, as it has been presented above, theology goes beyond just discussing some abstract concept about God. Theology is a concrete discussion about God and how he relates to his creation. It is practical in the sense that it needs to address the issues that people face in society. It is in this understanding that this article views the theology and development discourses as relevant in theological discussion.

## Theological and biblical concepts of development

Having discussed what theology is, it's also important to give a theological definition and biblical concept of development. Development is a concept that is difficult to define because people's perceptions of it vary (Magezi 2017:8). The definition of 'development' is difficult to pin down because what one person sees as progress may not be considered development at all or perhaps a decrease, according to Cloete, Groenewald and Van Wyk (1996:10–20). It requires weighing values. As reported by Cloete et al. (1996) as well as other academics and practitioners, however, development is commonly associated with other synonyms like change, progress, advancement, reformation, transformation or even revolution (Anderson 1996:15–30; Cloete et al. 1996:10–20). Development must be understood in reference to a specific area of our lives. It could have a political, social, economic or physical component. Development, in Sanou's words (2016), refers to a change, an improvement, advancement, an evolution, etc. It is a transition from one undesirable circumstance to another more desirable one.

The word 'development', like the word 'Trinity', does not appear in the Bible (Ajulu 2010:168; Erickson 2007:346). The concept of development, on the other hand, can be found in both the Old and New Testaments. Although the Bible does not use the word 'development', there is evidence that the authors of the Old and New Testaments were aware of the concept and used different words to allude to it in their works. There is a need to find backing from the scripture regarding the concepts of development in order to highlight the plausibility of theology and development discourses.

As development is a broad term (Todaro & Smith 2012:14), this article engages with the aspect of churches involvement in community development. This entails multiple stages of social, economic, ecological, political and cultural transition and change. Within this framework, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated 169 goals serve as an important reference point (Öhlmann et al. 2022:10). The conceptual definition of development in this article refers to development as any process that results in positive change, specifically an improvement in the quality of people's lives and their environment. It is from this understanding of

development that this article seeks some biblical concepts that express similar idea.

## Development as fruitfulness

The first place to look at the concept of development is in the narrative of creation. In Genesis 1:28, the Bible has this: *And God blessed them. And God said to them, Be fruitful ...*

The Hebrew word used for fruitful is פָּרָה [parah]. The word is translated as bearing fruit, becoming fruitful, flourishing and increasing (Brown, Driver & Briggs 2015:826). A significant point of profound theological significance is that fruitfulness begins with God, who creates the world, and humans with the capacity to be fruitful. This is the same word that Joseph used in Genesis 41:52 to name his son Ephraim, indicating that God had blessed him with progeny. Being fruitful in one's life entails being productive. This implies that God's plan for man is for him to be productive. Development implies all that the word פָּרָה stands for. In the Old Testament, to be fruitful implies to flourish in one's life and to increase not only in number but also in productivity.

The concept of development in the New Testament is connected to the idea of fruitfulness in that it signifies the well-being of people. The word that is used in the New Testament for fruitfulness is καρποφόρος (karpophoros) and the verb used is εὐφρορέω [euphoreo] which is translated as to bear fruit; to bear well, bring a good harvest, yield abundantly, bring forth plentifully (Thayer 2011). In John 15:8, Jesus used the same term to convey to his disciples that their commitment to him will result in great fruitfulness. Jesus claimed in John 15 that his disciples' fruitfulness would bring glory to his Father, a statement that is analogous to God's blessing of a man with the ability to bear fruit in Genesis 1.

Paul draws on a rich vein that runs through the entire Bible when he talks of 'producing fruit' in Colossians 1:6, 10. The phrases 'bearing fruit and growing' (1:6) and 'bearing fruit ... growing' (1:10) are strikingly similar to Genesis 1:28's phraseology and thought. Paul appears to be implying that the gospel is forming a people who are now fulfilling the purpose of the creation mandate, that they are being recreated in the image of God (see Col 3:9–10). The gospel is not only bearing fruit and growing as it spreads around the world (externally), but it is also bearing fruit in the Colossians who heard and embraced the message (internally). As a result, Paul likely sees God's originally intended design for humanity finally being realised through the power of the gospel, bearing fruit in the lives of men and women.

## Development as blessedness

In Genesis 1:28, God blessed man. The Hebrew word used is בָּרַךְ [barak] which has an idea of having prosperity by God as in 1 Chronicles 17:27 (Brown et al. 2015:139). In the Old Testament, the concept of being blessed frequently refers to having access to all of life's necessities. This includes both spiritual and temporal blessings (McGrath 2001). God

promises in Deuteronomy 28:1 that if his people obey him, he will exalt them above all other nations. This principle is stated explicitly in that verse. And this concept of blessedness ties together all of the material blessings mentioned in Deuteronomy (Dt 28:1–14). Numbers 6:23–27 is a key passage in the Old Testament that uses the word ‘blessed’.

In the New Testament, in Matthew 5, Jesus used the Greek word *μακάριος* [*makarios*] which has the idea of a description of a believer in an enviable or fortunate position from receiving God’s provision and/or favour which literally extends his grace and/or benefits (Strong, Kohlenberger & Swanson 2001:1625) Jesus used the Greek word *makarios* to reassure his followers that they would experience God’s favour in all facets of their lives as they lived in the world (cf Mt 5:1–13). Vine (1996) asserts that the Lord indicates in the beatitudes not only the characteristics of those who are ‘fortunate’, but also their essence, which is the utmost good. According to the Bible, being blessed means leading a fulfilling life on all levels – spiritually, physically and mentally – and having a holistic understanding of development.

## Development as prosperity

There are different Hebrew words which are rendered as prosperity. The first one is *tobtov* which signifies good, better, well, goodness, goodly, wealth as in Proverbs 19:18. The second one is *shelev* which is translated as prosperity proper. The third one is *shalev* which is similar to the second one; however, it is translated as at ease, peaceable, quietness, prosperity and wealthy. The fourth one is *shalvah*, and it is translated as prosperity, peaceably, quietness, abundance and peace. The fifth one is *shalach*, which implies being in good condition as in Joshua 1:8. The sixth one is *shalom*, which also refers to peace, well, welfare, prosperity, and health. Therefore, the idea of the word ‘prosper’ in the Old Testament is closely linked to development in the sense that when used to refer to people, prosper involves having a good life (see 1 Ki 2:3).

The word in the New Testament Greek is *εὐδοῶ* (*eudoo*) and it is a union of two words *eu* and *hodos* which literally means to have a good journey or way. Strong’s definition (2001:2171) renders this word as to help on the road; succeed in reaching; figuratively, to succeed in business affairs, to have a way opened. Vine’s Dictionary (1996) defines prosper as ‘to help on one’s way’ (*eu*, ‘well’, *hodos*, ‘a way or journey’). It is used in the Passive Voice signifying ‘to have a prosperous journey’, Romans 1:10; metaphorically, ‘to prosper, be prospered’, 1 Cor 16:2, RV;<sup>4</sup> ‘(as) he may prosper’, AV;<sup>5</sup> ‘(as God) hath prospered (him)’, literally, ‘in whatever he may be prospered’, that is in material things. The continuous tense suggests the successive circumstances of varying prosperity. In 3 John 1:2 the word is used of the ‘prosperity’ of physical and spiritual health. Hence, the biblical understanding of the word *prosper* implies having a good life.

4. Revised version.

5. Authorised version.

## Development as being in peace (*Shalom*)

*Shalom* is a critical concept in the Hebrew Old Testament appearing 397 times (Franklin 2020:1). In Hebrew *shalom* is rendered as ‘peace, wholeness, well-being’. It describes the ideal human state, both individual and communal, the ultimate gift from God (Achtmeier 1996:1003). Peace is frequently associated with other words. The Old Testament speaks of ‘peace and security’, usually in the context of an invasion (2 Ki 20:19; Ps 122:7), as well as ‘peace and prosperity’ (Dt 23:6; Ezr 9:12). Peace is associated with material well-being, good harvests and safety from wild beasts and enemies in this region (Lv 26:6–10; Zch 8:12). Peace is also associated with moral concepts. It is linked to truth in the sense of loyalty (Es 9:30; Zch 8:16, 19). Above all, it is found in conjunction with righteousness (Ps 85:10; Is 60:17). Righteousness brings peace (Is 32:17), but the wicked have no peace (Is 48:22; 57:21) (Achtmeier 1996:823). Other ways *shalom* is translated into English are determined by context. Words and phrases in the NIV include the following: ‘safety, prosperity, well-being; intactness, wholeness; peace can have a focus of security, safety which can bring feelings of satisfaction, well-being and contentment’ (Goodrick & Kohlenberger 1999:1544).

The Greek word *eirene* is similar to *shalom* in concept and is translated as peace, harmony, tranquillity, safety, welfare, health, often with an emphasis on lack of strife or reconciliation in a relationship, such as when one has ‘peace with God’ (Goodrick & Kohlenberger 1999:1544). The apostle Paul, for example, uses *eirene* in the context of the outcome of Christ’s redemptive work in Romans 5:1. A person finds peace as a result of the hope of salvation that comes from a new relationship with God. According to Hunter (ed. 2010:228), ‘the entire biblical narrative revolves around the shalom God intended and that he will, one day, restore’. Through his redemptive work, compassion and miracles, Christ entered our history to ‘model shalom’ (ed. Hunter 2010:229). In other words, as the apostle Paul put it, ‘he is our peace, the one who united both groups and destroyed the middle wall of partition’ (Eph 2:14). Christ came to be our shalom and to instil a lived vision of God’s *shalom* within every place and sphere where Christians are present (ed. Hunter 2010:248). When Jesus said he came ‘that they may have life, and have it to the full’ (Jn 10:10); Bryant Myers (1999:51) notes the fact that this richness of life is present in just, happy, pleasant relationships that allow everyone to contribute and to always live fully.

## Development as progress

In the New Testament, the word *προκοπή* [*prokore*] has the same idea as the concept of development that has been put forward by this study. The word, which is translated as progress, advance, has a literal rendering of advancement by chopping down whatever impedes progress. It means to take away the obstacles that impede one’s progress. The word

was used in antiquity of pioneers and armies clearing away (chopping down) forests in order to reach their destination (Bible Hub 2022<sup>6</sup>; Vine 1996:138).

Another New Testament Greek word which conveys the idea of development similar to progress is *ἀποκάλυψις* which is rendered as *revelation*. To reveal something in the biblical sense means to uncover, expose, lay bare, or disclose. According to the Bible, God is the one who discloses (Dn 2:28). The advanced understanding of the human potential and life betterment achieved by responsible use of material and spiritual resources, in accordance with God's purpose, could thus be understood as development in light of scripture (Fosu 2022:153). People have God given potentials which are buried as a result of the fall. The restoration of relationship between God and humanity through the work of the cross makes these human potentials to be effective. Thus, the possibility of humanity to progress in their lives has been revealed through Christ. This theological understanding of development resonates with the biblical agenda where the forgiveness of sins and the security of an afterlife are not the only focal point of its narrative but also the declaration that the world belongs to God, and that he has a wonderful purpose for the creation as well as that he is continuing to act in human history in order to bring about abundant blessings for all. God's agenda includes and is not limited to forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, justice, mercy, conversion and radical renewal, the liberation of the oppressed, freedom for captives, and blessing for the poor (Lk 4:18–19). This New Testament understanding of the word progress really ties well with the concept of development presented by Todaro and Smith (2012). According to Todaro and Smith (2012:21), development implies a process of improving the quality of all human lives. In this process, human beings are empowered to cut off, clear away or chop down whatever impedes reaching the destination of their lives which is to live a better life (Sumner & Tribe 2008:26). This better life must be perceived in three aspects of economic growth, environmental stewardship and social inclusion which are carried across all sectors of development both in the present and in the future (World Bank 2015:1).

The theological and biblical concept of development explained above is the driving force that moves churches to intervene in community development ensuring that people's lives are fruitful, blessed, prosperous, peaceful and that they are progressing in making their lives better.

## The implications of theology and development debate on the transformation of the communities

The article has argued that the idea of development is biblical. So what does this imply in relation to community development? Firstly, it implies that theology must therefore be an instrument through which challenges that communities face are deliberated and acted upon (Magezi

<sup>6</sup>Bible Hub, viewed 29 September, from <https://biblehub.com/greek/4297.htm>.

2019b:8). Conradie (1993:29) emphasises the need for theology that first recognises that actual disputes in the public spheres to be of the utmost importance to theological objectives. Thus, there should be an effort to analyse the moral and religious implications of some of the pressing societal situations and to shed light on them using Christian symbolism and doctrine (Conradie 1993). Kim (2017:40) argues for a theology that must be public, reflective and rational in its involvement in society to promote the kingdom of God, which is for the sake of the poor and the marginalised. Considering Kim's understanding of the function of theology, it encompasses empowering people to serve in their communities. As a result, theology by its very nature rejects the idea of individualism (Magezi 2020:62). Osmer and Schweitzer (2003:215) point out that theology that is practical must not overlook the public aspect of its work. This understanding was emphasised by Juma (2015:1) who asserts that the purpose of one's theological education should not be the church alone, but rather to prepare one for service in the world (Dreyer 2004:919).

The theology and development debate should move Christian religious development workers to be holistic in their approaches. They are to build a holistic practical theological framework that takes into account practical spirituality, and social, physical, political and economic challenges. Magezi (2019a:1) notes that numerous difficulties that African communities face necessitate the involvement of multiple sectors to be addressed. Agang (2020:1) states the need for theological discussions to encompass public issues when he observed that living in Africa quickly makes one aware of the numerous problems that must be addressed. African development has been hampered by issues such as bad governance, corruption, socioeconomic injustice, religious competition, tribal and ethnic conflicts, and political dominance. This calls for the intervention of churches to make an impact in addressing African problems by having a solid theology that goes beyond promising future deliverance and the salvation of our souls, to one that proclaims that God cares about people and hears their groans. It is in this perspective that the challenges that communities face could be addressed, hence the flourishing of their lives.

Secondly, theology must be appreciated in the process of transforming the communities. For instance, Öhlmann et al. (2022:4) points out how theology (religion) contributes to the fundamental socio-ecological transformation to create pathways into a sustainable future. In order for sustainable development to become a reality, significant paradigm shifts and profound changes in attitudes are required. It is in such context that religion/theology has a crucial role in paradigm shifts because it has the capacity to affect social and cultural values that can alter worldviews (Öhlmann et al. 2022). This understanding necessitates the importance of theology in the process of the transformation of communities.

## Conclusion

While the subject of development has become so predominant in recent theological discussions, there have been some flaws

that some scholars have pointed out regarding the theological and biblical basis for such deliberations. This article has attempted to locate such discussions and present the importance of having a theology that is public and practical in nature. From this article, three important things have been pointed out. Firstly, theology by its nature is geared to discuss not only the abstract concepts of God and doctrines. Theology needs to be concerned with the issues that people are facing in society. Secondly, God desires that people live a life that is flourishing as theological and biblical concepts of development have presented. Thirdly, because God's desire is for the flourishing of his creation, churches need to ensure that they are involved in the theological and practical discussion and one that enhances the betterment of people's lives and their environment in societies.

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