



**THE ROLE OF THE JUSTICE, DEVELOPMENT, AND PEACE COMMISSION (JDPC)
OF THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF IDAH IN POVERTY
ALLEVIATION IN IGALALAND**

By

OKPE, NICHOLAS OJOAJOGWU, Ph.D

Department of Religious Studies

Prince Abubakar Audu (Kogi State) University

Anyigba-Kogi State

okpe.n@ksu.edu.ng

And

KIZITO DANJUMA EDICHA

Postgraduate Student of Religious Studies Department

Prince Abubakar Audu (Kogi State) University

Anyigba-Kogi State

edichakizito@gmail.com

Abstract

Poverty, in its many forms and understanding, is believed to be responsible for so many problems in human history. It has been a plaque, a puzzle, and a worry, from generation to generation, and many institutions have sought ways of proffering solutions to this global problem. In this regard, Religion is believed to be the most laudable and most effective pathfinder and pacesetter in the direction of a sustainable remedy since it is the representation and the manifestation of the entirety of the human person, life, and worldview. This article, therefore, attempts to study the possible breakthrough of religion in this direction as it examines the activities of the Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the Catholic Diocese of Idah, Kogi State of Nigeria. This is an institution of the Catholic Church, committed to poverty alleviation, and reinstating human dignity through her programmes and projects. Of the many programmes of the JDPC, this work focuses mainly on community development and human empowerment. The work uses primary and secondary sources of data collection, employing historical, sociological, analytic, and evaluative methods to focus on the appraisal of this project in Igalaland. The work concludes that though poverty is a global problem, it has a human face, and the Catholic Diocese of Idah, using human instrumentality and ingenuity, has contributed to alleviating this situation. The role of the Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the Catholic Diocese of Idah in poverty alleviation in Igalaland is a testimony of the synergy between religion and society.



Introduction

Igalaland is blessed with rich agricultural endowments too numerous to mention. Nevertheless, the level of poverty in the land is very high as the economic development of the Igala nation and people has been impaired and negatively affected, traceable to political, economic, and ethnic factors.

The Catholic Church has tried over the years, to make a huge difference in the economic life of the people by attempting a paradigm shift from the prevalent technological ignorance, the attitude of nonchalance, and the character of corruption, that has crippled the Igala economy and occasioned the present lamentable state of poverty. The Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC), is the instrument with which to effect this change in narrative. In this article, the writer looks at the role of the JDPC as it attempts to alleviate the Igala nation from poverty through community development and human empowerment at different levels.

Brief Description of Igalaland and People

The word Igala represents the name of ethnic Igala people, their language and their identity as a people and it is the only one they subscribe to despite the various dialects which creates no problem of understanding among them (Okpe 27). Igalaland is located in the eastern region of Kogi State. That is east of the confluence of River Niger and River Benue. This land is “bounded on the north by Benue State, on the west by river Niger, on the east by Enugu State and the south by Anambra state. The width of Igalaland is 120 kilometres and length is about 160 kilometres” (Egbunu, Chieftaincy Titles 5).

The traditional Igala is mostly agrarian, with fishing and hunting as a good part of the people’s life. It has large markets that attract traders from neighbouring kingdoms and settlements. Such markets include Ejule, Anyigba, Ajaka, Afogamgam-Ankpa, and Ega-Idah (Paul and Edino 23). The major rivers include River Niger, Benue, and Anambra. The land has other major streams which include Ofu, Okura, Ubelle, Ajuna, Bagana, Owe, and Omala (Okwoli, An Outline History 2). Others include Oluka, Adale, Imabolo, Enetuwe and Inachalo. The few towns and villages situated along the basins of the rivers and streams have comparatively enough supply of water. The majority of the Igalaland have a shortage of water and they depend largely on the supply of water by the water tanker vehicles. In modern times, people have employed alternative means of accessing good water through the aid of boreholes and water harvesters in homes. The Ibaji area is mainly surrounded by water and is flooded throughout most of the year. Nevertheless, this waterlogged condition provides for the cultivation of rice and the harvest of large-sized yams and great hordes of fish in the area.

The most common trees found in the land include palm trees (ekpe), locust beans (okpehie), mahogany (ago), Iroko (uloko), white wood (uwewe), and Raffia palms (ugalo). Both forest and savannah crops thrived on the Igala soil such as yams, maize, melon, cassava, groundnuts, and sweet potatoes. Others include beans, benne seed, millet, and guinea corn (Egbunu, Igala Traditional Values 10). Common plantations are of Okra, banana (ogede), plantain (agbo), cashew (agala), and rubber (oli-are). Aside from hunting, farming, and fishing, Igalaland was



occupied with other economic activities such as textile production, dyeing, leather works, iron technology, rubber tapping, cotton weaving, and processing of Shea butter (Idakwoji 559-561). Administratively, by 1968, the Igala Native Authority was divided into three: Idah, Dekina, and Ankpa (Okwoli, *An Outline History* 1). At present, Igalaland is comprised of eight Local Government Areas namely: Idah, Ankpa, Dekina (all three were created in 1969 in the then Kwara State); Ofu – 1989; Olamaboro – 1989; Omala – 1996; Ibaji – 1996; and Igalamela/Odolu - 1996 (Amodu 19-22).

Igalaland attained the status of a kingdom as early as the mid-17th century AD and has a reputation as one of the oldest kingdoms in the Sub-Saharan region of West Africa (Paul and Edino 22).

The Catholic Church in Igalaland (Idah Diocese)

The apostolic prefecture of Idah was raised to the status of a Diocese on 17th December 1977 by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI (Okwoli, et al 1). Bishop Ephraim Silas Obot, who was until then the auxiliary bishop of Ikot-Ekpene Diocese, was appointed by the Holy See as its first bishop. The diocese covers the entirety of Igala and Bassa land and encompasses the nine (9) local government areas of Kogi East senatorial district. The headquarters of the diocese is Idah, which also serves as the headquarters of the Igala kingdom and the seat of the Attah of Igala.

The diocese is bounded in the North by the River Benue, shares boundary in the South with the Archdiocese of Onitsha, in the East by the Dioceses of Otukpo and Nsukka, and shares boundaries with the dioceses of Auchi and Lokoja and the River Niger. The diocese is occupied mainly by the Igala-speaking people. The other ethnic groups include the Bassa Komo, Bassa-Nge, and the Egbira mozum.

The current bishop, Anthony Ademu Adaji, MSP, was appointed as the auxiliary on the 28th of June 2007. He is the first indigenous of the Igala race and kingdom to be named substantive bishop, after the death of bishop Obot in 2009.

As of 1889, Igala and Bassa lands became part of Onitsha prefecture with Monsignor Leon Lejeune as the prefect apostolic of Onitsha in 1890. By 1900, he sent Rev. Fr. Joseph Lichen Berger to Dekina to start a mission there. Nevertheless, the Dekina mission failed and was closed down in 1905 due to hostilities with the natives who were predominantly Muslims (Idakwoji 557). This closure of the Dekina mission retarded major developmental strides for the Igalaland and created a big vacuum and a twenty-six-year-long silence in Catholic missionary activities in Igalaland (Okwoli, *An Outline History* 6).

When Shanahan became the bishop of Onitsha archdiocese in 1930, he called upon the German Spiritan Fathers, to reopen a mission in Igalaland. The work of the German missionaries in Igalaland (and in Nigeria in general), was brought to an abrupt end in 1940 at the outbreak of World War II since Nigeria was a British colony. The move by bishop Shanahan in 1930 had a long history but finally and successfully, led to the creation of Idah diocese in 1977.

The mission territory in Igalaland which began with two parishes: Idah - 1934, and Ankpa - 1939 (Okwoli, et al 10), has multiplied to 61 parishes and chaplaincies. At the inception of the diocese in 1977, there were just four (4) indigenous clergy among twelve expatriates. At the time of



writing, the number has grown to about 192 priests of Igala origin, and about seventy-five (75) indigenous female religious also serving in different parts of the globe.

Between 1956 and 1968, a total of fifty-nine (59) primary schools were established by the Catholic Mission covering the majority of the Igala area. There were also four(4) post-primary institutions already in operation, namely: Our Lady of Schools, Anyigba (1958), Holy Rosary College, Idah (1962), St. Peter's College, Idah (1963), and St. Charles College, Ankpa (1967) (Okwoli, *An Outline History* 64-70). These institutions existed until the government policy of taking over mission schools in 1972. At present, the Catholic Church has on record a total number of 45 Nursery/Primary Schools, 21 Secondary Schools, and 7 health institutions scattered all over the Igala area.

A Critique of the Poverty Reduction Programmes in Nigeria

The Nigerian government over the years has made considerable efforts in reducing poverty. These programmes are briefly enumerated. Agricultural Development Project (ADP) -1973; The Operation Feed the Nation- 1976; Free and Compulsory Primary Education (FCPE) – 1977; Austerity Measures – 1978; The Green Revolution Programme (GRP) – 1980; Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) – 1986; National Directorate of Employment (NDE) – 1986; Directorate of Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) – 1986; Better Life Programme (BLP) -1987; Peoples Bank of Nigeria (PBN)- 1990; Family Support Programme (FSP) – 1994; Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) – 1999; National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) - 1999. National *Fadama* Development Project I&II (NFDP) - 1993-1999; National *Fadama* Development Project III (NFDP) – 2004; National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) – 2004 (Kura et al 49, Sani et al 193, and Kolawole 169-172).

However, these programmes could not be sustained due to some factors which include, “programme inconsistency, poor implementation, corruption of government officials and public servants, poor targeting mechanisms, and failure to focus directly on the poor” (Ogwunike 11). The corruption that crippled these programmes is that which cuts across the various stages of planning, execution, and implementation of these programmes, in which the benefits were directed to the wrong destinations (Kura et al 52). Obadan observes that “...resource allocation to agricultural programmes, favour non-farmers at the expense of the real farmers” (112).

The Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC) in Idah Diocese

The Catholic Church has always understood her mission in line with the teaching of Jesus Christ to care for the body and the soul of man, and the wellbeing of society. But more profoundly in the 20th century, this responsibility became more pronounced as it formed the reason for the first social encyclical in the Church, *Rerum Novarum* (*of new things*), of Pope Leo XIII in 1891 (Dorr 13-33). In this document, the Pope enumerated the social challenges of our time and the need for the Church to respond accordingly (Okpe, *In My Father's House* 28). Since the door of social awareness was opened thereafter, so many other Church documents followed suit. Okpe points out that this intervention is necessary and urgent as the world is plagued by so many social ills



that torment and devalue humanity (33-34). This calls for the need for JDPC in Nigeria, and in Igalaland in particular.

JDPC is an organ of the Catholic Church called the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace established for the protection of human rights and the promotion of justice and equity as catalyst for peace and integral development. The work of the Commission is that of advocacy, capacity building for people, animation, empowering for solidarity action, and peacebuilding. The JDPC is the Church's preferential option for the poor (Okpe 94). This faith-based organisation was founded in Idah in 1987 as a ministry of charity and service and was officially inaugurated in Idah Diocese by the late bishop Ephraim Silas Obot on the 16th of April 2006.

The JDPC Idah has enjoyed partnership with, and sponsorship from some Government and Non-Government agencies, local and foreign, to achieve her objectives. Some of these include: CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development); CCFN (Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria); CRS (Catholic Relief Services); KAICID (King Abdallah International Centre for Interreligious Dialogue); SMILE (Sustainable Mechanism for Improving Livelihoods and Household Empowerment); Manos Unidas, Spain; *MISEREOR*, Germany; Open Hand Foundation, Switzerland; and Later Day Saints Charity

Poverty Alleviation Activities of the JDPC in Igalaland

Among the plethora of poverty alleviation programmes of the JDPC, this paper focuses on those of Human Empowerment and Community Development.

i. Human Empowerment and Community Development Programmes of the JDPC, Idah

The computer literacy programme started in 2008 in Idah, with much attention on adult computer literacy. The first enrolment witnessed about 18 adults. After the training, most of them were able to procure computers for themselves through the assistance of the JDPC (JDPC Report, 2012). The programme was therefore opened to the youths in 2009 and remained very affordable, especially for those of poor backgrounds. The center in Idah was commissioned on April 24th, 2010 to accommodate the fast-growing population for the computer literacy programme. Through the aid from the Spanish Organisation *Manos Unidas*, a good number of computers were procured and so many youths have successfully gained the experience (JDPC Report 2012).

As part of the JDPC efforts to strengthen and sustain households economically and as graduation criteria for the SMILE project of 2015, 235 beneficiaries were supported with cash. Each caregiver got the sum of ₦20,000.00 to invest in the expansion of their businesses or farms, or as capital to begin a new business locally. The continuity of a beneficiary in this scheme depended on the outcome of the initial capital. For the 2015 – 2017 JDPC SMILE programme, beneficiaries were enrolled for different skills training in the communities of Ajaka and Odolu. This project was carried out by the Household Economic Strengthening unit of CRS/SMILE. The first set of trainees in 2016 had 30 beneficiaries of which only nine were certified and graduated. These were entitled to the facilities to be distributed thus: 5 sewing machines; 2 hair dryers; 1 Gas baking oven; 1 Vulcanizer's pumping machine (M12) and compressor. Afterward, 50 other beneficiaries were enrolled for the skills training in the second set in 2017. At the end of their



training, 27 were qualified for the facilities. They were equally provided with the materials for their sustainability as soon as they finished. They received 18 sewing machines, 5 hair dryers, and 4 gas baking ovens respectively. After the beneficiaries had gotten their items, SMILE conducted a Site Information Management System Assessment to do a follow-up on the progress of the beneficiaries in their respective sustainable projects. This was conducted on 30th June 2017 for the project in question.

The contribution of women to the economy of Igalaland cannot be ignored. Yusufu attests to this fact as she observes that though hard work is conventionally believed to be a duty of the male folk, the empowerment of women is of major significance to the economic growth of a people (153). To this end, JDPC strives to empower the rural women in Igalaland and help free families and communities from the scourge of poverty as they are given some level of sustainability for economic independence. In 2014, with the support of the Open Hand Foundation, Switzerland, JDPC initiated an empowerment programme called PROMIC Idah (Promotion of Microenterprises Programme). PROMIC is aimed at poverty reduction through the provision of micro-credit facilities and entrepreneurial training targeted at women. In 2015, 250 women belonging to 43 women cooperative societies in selected communities in Igalaland were specifically identified, enlisted, trained, and empowered with credit facilities. In the same vein, a poultry farm was established in Idah to support women. The 2013 report indicates that 300 layers and 100 broilers were on the farm (JDPC 2015). By December 2014, a total of 500 broilers were sold to facilitate the training project (Abah 12-13).

Water projects were also carried out to salvage the situation in some selected communities. This project involved an assessment of the water, sanitation, and hygiene conditions of three selected communities in Igalaland namely: Idah, Ankpa, and Agaliga-Efabo. The project began with advocacy visits to the traditional rulers of these communities to brief them on the need for the project. A researcher administered some questionnaires to the respondents in the community to get information to add to the obvious conditions in the communities. At the intervention of JDPC, the communities under survey, were given urgent attention. Idah got a solar-powered borehole, Ankpa got a borehole, and Agaliga-Efabo got a water harvester (JDPC Report 2015). These projects have been of immense assistance to the respective communities.

Health is another major aspect of concern for the JDPC to ensure good living. Before the official inauguration of JDPC in 2006, the Catholic Mission of Idah had already established many health institutions in Igalaland, which provided a safe platform for the health sector of the JDPC. These health institutions are Grimard Catholic Hospital, Anyigba, Mother and Child Care Clinic, Ankpa, Immaculate Heart Clinic, Awo-Akpali, St. Luke Hospital and Maternity, Egume, St. John Cottage Hospital, Akpanya, and Catholic Mission Clinic, Iyano. The JDPC collaborated with these health institutions to execute its health projects, especially in rural areas. The Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, Idah, came to join the league of health facilities of the Diocese in April 2010.

The Grimard Catholic Hospital, which is the largest and the mother Catholic health facility in Igalaland, was established in 1962. Since then, it has made an immeasurable impact in Igalaland. The Grimard Catholic Hospital, among other things, was among the first health institutions to begin services to cater for HIV/AIDS registration and care for patients in Igalaland. It equally



began an effective administration of Anti Retroviral Drugs (ARV), and the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) awareness.

The era of the Covid-19 pandemic marked a very challenging time for the JDPC. Alongside the awareness and sensitisation activities, relief materials were provided such as sanitizers, face masks, and hand washing buckets to individuals, communities, and institutions in many of the rural communities in Igalaland, sponsored by *Misereor* and Idah Diocese.

The JDPC assisted in purchasing ambulance vehicles in some communities. Between 2006 - 2012, ambulance and utility vehicles were provided for St. Luke Clinic and Maternity, Egume, through the sponsorship of *Misereor*, Germany. St. John Cottage Hospital, Akpanya, Immaculate Heart Clinic, Awo-Akpali, and Imane communities also got vehicles respectively (JDPC Report 2012).

Another very challenging period for the JDPC was the flood disasters of 2022. It was so devastating that it required special assistance from the health sector. Apart from providing accommodation for the victims, their good health had to be ensured, since the obvious conditions would not permit comfortable accommodation. As a result, the JDPC ensured that medical services were provided for them regularly using the health facilities and personnel of the Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, Idah.

Agriculture is another area of breakthrough of the JDPC in Igalaland. The intervention of the JDPC in the agricultural sector is historically traced to the works of the Diocesan Development Services (DDS) of Idah diocese, which basically, undertook agricultural reforms in Igalaland. The DDS collaborated with the AADP (Anyigba Agricultural Development Project) from 1976 until 1983 when they parted ways due to the unstable nature of government policies. In the event of this situation, the DDS moved in the direction of the “on-farm” research. This is a new dimension and an opportunity for the local farmers to utilise their agricultural products to meet up with their economic needs (McNamara and Morse 65). Farmers were introduced to improved qualities of the crops they regularly cultivated and farms were used as experimental fields, which yielded success. To better facilitate this programme, the DDS fully introduced the FLAIR (Farmers Level Agricultural Innovations and Response) programme (66-71). It is aimed at improving crop variety. The FLAIR research, which began in 1987, lasted until 1994, and from thence henceforth, farmers in Igalaland were provided with an improved variety of crops. The DDS established farms at Iyegwu-Idah, Ankpa, and Ibaji, which were used for the experiments. The research for improved agricultural life was carried out with crops such as Maize, Cowpea, Groundnut, Cassava, Rice, and Soya beans (93-108).

In 1991, the new improved species of the palm tree was introduced to farmers on the DDS training programme. They were inventions that came through the ADP (Agricultural Development Project), but most farmers could not access them until the DDS made them available and affordable. People were recruited from all parts of Igalaland to be trained on the modalities of planting and nurturing these new seedlings. The palm seedlings mature and produce palm fruits ready for oil processing within six years of planting as against the local species that



takes almost a lifetime to mature to the processing point. Between 2015 and 2017, as part of the Household Economic Strengthening Strategies in the rural areas, JDPC Idah provided high-quality protein maize for 419 caregivers and household heads, pro-vitamin A cassava, and fresh sweet potatoes species to caregivers and household heads in Ajaka, Odolu and Imane communities (JDPC Report 2017).

The Alternative Fertilizer Project was carried out in 2021 to assist farmers with fertilizers to improve their crop production. Idachaba recalls that in 1976, the federal government centralised procurement in the Fertilizer Procurement Unit of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture to aid local farmers (179). However, the system had many setbacks. There were delays in delivery, hikes in prices, reduced quantity, and complaints of unjust disbursement to the local farmers (180-181). This is why the JDPC fertilizer project became very necessary to aid farmers and save them from the frustration of the government. While the JDPC had access to the fertilizer that is from the government agencies for just disbursement, farmers were equally introduced to the Alternative Fertilizer which became an added advantage. This is obtained from natural materials, in and around the environment such as yam pills, cassava pills, animal dung, and food wastes, gathered and processed over a while. It is a system of using nature to boost farming.

The JDPC farm has a natural source of water supply using the spring water that flows in the farm. This water is being processed for irrigation purposes and equally used for the water factory, which processes very healthy and potable water for consumption.

ii. Employment Opportunities

The JDPC, through the projects in Igalaland, has provided employment opportunities to many people. While some gain the experiences to aid future employment in other places, some others have had the opportunity of undergoing further training by JDPC and this has improved the quality of productivity to the economic advantage of the individual and the JDPC.

Challenges of the JDPC in Igalaland

The JDPC Idah has been faced with so many challenges in the course of executing its projects emanating from both internal and external forces. Some of these have frustrated the projects, and some of which they could surmount.

There is the challenge of the paucity of funds. JDPC has been faced with the issues of poor funding since its inception. This is because there are too many projects to accomplish but limited funds have affected its achievements (JDPC reports 2012). Furthermore, as a result of the inadequate funds, JDPC cannot meet up with the salary demands of the workers. There is an obvious case of incessant resignation of workers, even those trained by the JDPC, as soon as they secure a more paying job (JDPC report 2007, 2012, 2014).

One other major challenge is the fact that the efforts of the Catholic Church towards poverty alleviation are not always supported by the government. One undeniable reason is that “the Church will not condone corruption within the system created for poverty reduction in Nigeria” (Onah, et al 6). Connected to this fact is the truth that since the JDPC will not tolerate any unethical behaviours on the part of its workers, some staff cannot withstand the disciplinary



measures put up by JDPC to ensure promptness, accuracy, accountability, and other virtues that are praiseworthy of a viable and an organised institution that is responsible for the wellbeing of the common people.

Recommendations

1. JDPC will have to concentrate more on building income-generating projects to finance its future projects, meet up with the financial demands of the staff, and benefit the targeted beneficiaries.
2. JDPC should do a serious background check to understand areas that need more of its interventions. Some communities need more poverty remediation programmes than others do. This is why there should be a feasibility study so that communities that are more in need of specific programmes will have such at their doorstep.
3. The government policies on poverty reduction are very good and could be good grounds for a formidable plan. On the other hand, governmental agencies lack the modalities of executing their plans. Therefore, there should be a church and state synergy in poverty remediation programmes. The government should consult with, and understudy the working principles of JDPC as a template for its programmes.
4. The JDPC can, and should establish production industries that will become the point at which the natural foods in Igalaland can be harnessed and processed into locally made goods, and which can become sources of revenue to the state and the JDPC for programme sustainability.
5. JDPC should collaborate with finance institutions to assist farmers with loans which should be strictly and diligently, monitored, to assist individuals who are unable to obtain loans as a result of lack of adequate social security.
6. JDPC should have an enlightenment programme to encourage and incorporate the younger ones in agriculture as a means of livelihood.
7. The government at the local levels should create new job opportunities and/or revive the dilapidated industrial sites that once existed in Igalaland. This will help to alleviate poverty as it creates employment opportunities.

Conclusion

It would be incorrect to conclude that poverty can be eradicated from Nigeria and Igalaland in particular, especially in the face of so many challenges, which can only make the struggle for poverty alleviation more difficult. Nevertheless, what can be said is that considerable efforts have been made and will still be made despite the hurdles since the aim is to salvage the human person from poverty and its implications. No matter how much JDPC has contributed, it has done only a little compared to the much that is needed in Igalaland. It is worthy of observation that the eradication of poverty “requires the contribution of all citizens and it cannot be done in a few short years” (Enegho, *The Social Context of Poverty* 73). Poverty alleviation in Igalaland is an exercise that takes time, attention, and cooperation of all the people since poverty alleviation is multifaceted. The JDPC is a preferential option for the poor which uses all available means to



alleviate the people from poverty, gives them a better course for life, and advocates preferential treatment for the poor (In My Father's House 92).

When the rights and privileges of the poor are respected, sustainable development will be the outcome. Enegho has rightly observed that "What the contemporary society needs most urgently today, are the Christians who are ready to bear witness in their lives to Christ with spontaneity of peace, justice and development" (The Social Context of Poverty 73). The JDPC has presented itself as the voice of the voiceless and the hope of the hopeless in Igalaland. While the JDPC is still struggling with sustainability, the template of JDPC can be a reference point for government poverty alleviation programmes, at least in implementation, maintenance culture, and accountability. The struggle to alleviate poverty is no doubt a difficult process, but not impossible. Since the church, as an institution can arrive at some considerable success, it follows that the government can do more, either in collaboration with the Church or using the church as an agent to achieving the desired goal. Poverty can be alleviated and reduced in Igalaland if the right parameters are set in place.

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