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<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>ISBN: 978-221-0382</th>
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<td>Gold in Earthen Vessels: Care of Christian Youths “The Role of Youths in Social Development”</td>
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<td>Category</td>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
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<td>Publisher</td>
<td>Missio Germany</td>
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<td>Publication Date</td>
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The Role of Youths in Social Development

by Fr. Francis Nnalue Akukwe

The Bible tells us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and God set about to develop it and to make it a little more habitable. He introduced light, the sky - a roof for the earth, water, the soil, vegetation and fruits of all kinds. He went on to decorate and furnish the earth and the heavens with the sun, moon and stars; with animals, birds and fishes of all sorts. Believing that the earth was then tolerably comfortable, God brought in man to live in it. Man was indeed to take possession of this earth but he had to continue from where God stopped to subdue, improve and develop the earth for his great benefit and joy, and this in union with God. "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over all the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all living things that move on the earth. See, I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth ... and all the animals of the land and all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that bestride the earth" (Gen. 1:28-30).

Man has, since he received this commission from God, endeavoured to improve his environment to make it more and more habitable and comfortable.

He once lived by merely gathering fruits from trees. He fashioned himself some tools to be the better able to manipulate some animals and victuals for his sustenance. He made do with the bare earth for his bed and leaves for his clothing. He sought the warm confines of caves for protection from cold, heat and rain. He later developed some makeshift huts which he could fashion and refashion at will. He came to domesticate some animals and to cultivate some fruits to be better assured of food. The changes and adaptation continue to the present level of technology.

Man's social development has continued on to our own day and is likely to continue until God's last hour on earth strikes.

Our ancestors here in Igboland tried to organise their lives within the prevailing conditions of their stage of development. They harnessed the idea of their day to create better social, economic and political climates for themselves.

Today, we have come to know and appreciate the fruits of the Euro-American industrial, economic, political and social revolutions. We are totally dissatisfied with the traditional socio-economic conditions in which the generality of our people live. Many of our sons
and daughters have travelled to, lived in or learned of the more developed conditions of life in Europe or America. Most of us crave for and dream of the day when our society here will attain such standards.

Social Development Defined
Generally, when we talk of social development, we seem to look on Europe and America as our exemplar and prototype. When we talk of providing better and sufficient food our minds spontaneously run to scientific and mechanised agriculture, modern animal husbandry and agro-industries. When we think of economic development we think of modern economic services and institutions such as Banks, insurances, commercial and business concerns; the exploitation of our rich mineral, natural and human resources. When we talk of improving our social conditions we recall the social institutions and services the white man has brought us - modern housing and urbanisation; modern means of transportation by land, water and air; the post and telecommunication; various recreational, sporting and cultural services and organisations. For us, rural development seems to mean the effort to bring the above blessings to our remote towns and villages. We clamour today for more and better roads for our vehicles and motorcars. We want our towns electrified; pipe-borne water introduced and cottage industries established.

To improve our health services means building hospitals, health centre, maternities and clinics. It means better and more personal hygiene, environmental sanitation and preventive medicine. It means the elimination of malnutrition and reduction of the high mortality rate of our people.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IS THE SUM TOTAL OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE IN A SOCIETY, TARGETED TOWARDS THE ADVANCEMENT, WELL-BEING AND BETTERMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND HIS ENVIRONMENT. The emphasis in social development is the people, the individual, the whole man, his economic well-being and security, his interpersonal relationship, the appreciation and development of his personality, the use of his leisure time, his spiritual well-being; in short the aim of planned social development is to ensure that every individual in society lives a decent human life. People are provided with services to make them happy, not because they can afford these, but because they need the services for decent human living.

Today we want better and more education, more schools, colleges and universities. We want to eliminate poverty and destitution and to
contain most physical, social and economic disabilities and handicaps, including illiteracy. We know very well that these improvement do not just happen to exist. People have to work for them. Some people have to fertilize others, infect them and get them moving. These people who stimulate others, who move others to engage in a common cause; who magnetize others with their new ideas, visions and actions are LEADERS. These are the harbingers of change.

The School and Social Development

Human behaviour in general is learned. (only a few instinctive ones are a result of maturation.) One generation passes its experiences to another; one age grade to another, one people to another. By this sharing of social experience, and action resulting from it, man continuously changes the condition of his life experiences and coping techniques were done informally and within the primary societies. The total way in which a people solve their common life problems constitute their way of life or their culture. With the specialization of functions the passing on of culture changed from the exclusive preserve of the primary society to being a shared responsibility between the family and a specialized agency - the school. In terms of planning for social development, the schooled people were in better position than others in that they have been exposed to the problems, philosophies of life, techniques of coping and the results of past and present generations.

Social development services have not much meaning if they are divorced from the people’s past and present problems, philosophies, and techniques. It is here that our schools in the past have failed us a little bit. The philosophies that our schools expounded, the techniques that they extolled, the cultures they held for admiration had been western or the whiteman’s culture. Consequently the social services that schooled men advocated or introduced are those based not on the Igbo man’s philosophy of life and culture, but on the white man’s philosophy. The Igbo people have their traditional way of assisting an able-bodied farmer who has not the means of working his farm, of seeing that everybody who needs a house is housed, of seeing that babies whose mothers die after birth are cared for, of providing leisure places and times, of providing communication links and other utilities they consider necessary for decent living. It is for us to see that these traditional values do not perish. They are human as well as Christian. On them rests meaningful Social Development in Igboland.
Since the end of the civil war, many federal and state roads in Igboland (especially in Anambra State) have broken down. Yet in the rural communities the people are joining together to improve and make motorable the footpaths that connect one village to another - that is social development. Many communities are not waiting for Uncle Sam to come to their assistance with regard to developing the markets. They carry on themselves. In a recent research, I did in Anambra State, it was discovered that of the 1,399 born in 1976 whose mothers died at birth or soon after child birth, only 40 of them (ie 3%) were being cared for in Motherless Babies Homes. The other 1,359 were being provided for within their communities. Yet in terms of publicity, it is the services in the motherless babies' home that strikes the headlines. Why shouldn't they strike the headlines. After all they show we are doing something similar to what the Oyibo people do. In the same way the services provided for aged people in "Old people's Home" make the news. But the more numerous motherless babies, old people, orphans and other needy people who are provided for according to traditional customs are taken for granted. The point that I am making here is that our former school system tended to make us regard what we produce and our way of doing things as inferior - Igbo-made. Yet development is not possible without recognition of what you are and what you have.

Gatherings like your own today help raise consciousness in matters like this. You will help to make the general public aware of the great values of our way of doing things and our way of life. From this general awareness, we hope those who will be responsible for the planning of social development in future will positively build on the foundation that is there already. In order words we need a new type of leaders in our social development. Leadership is the ability to bring the people to where they want to go. Our people still want to be their brother's keepers. We need leaders who will help us maintain this keen interest in one another, leaders who will help us provide better care for our brothers, and not leaders who will force us to push this care to an impersonal third person.

There is Need for Leaders
The Communist believes that everyone can be a leader - that everyone can lead if he is shown how to. Leaders are MADE not BORN. The ideal would be to create a proper climate in each society for the grooming of as many leaders as possible - the more the better. It is not healthy and does not make for steady growth and development when
lone leaders dominate the scene. Such leaders generally degenerate into harsh and ruthless tyrants or at best, benevolent despots. The society can develop lopsidedly or stagnate. Cross fertilization of ideas and opinions is a necessary ingredient in social development.

There has hardly been a society without its leaders. The village elders, the titled men and priests were such in our traditional society. Today our Government functionaries, our community heads, Chiefs and Councillors: our youth and women leaders abound. Our churches and religious organisation are replete with leaders. Our society today is not short of leaders in any sphere of our national life. The strange thing is that things don't seem to be happening as fast and as good as they should, seeing the number and magnitude of our leaders. Perhaps, the answer to this may be found in the QUALITY and calibre of our leaders and their leadership.

Social Development and Christian Youths
But why speak to you about social development, instead of a discussion on some spiritual theme or subject? For answer to this I would want you to read Is. Chap. 16:1-9 and Lk. 4:16-22. The Messiah is one who brings the GOOD NEWS to the afflicted:
- he binds up the broken hearted;
- he proclaims liberty to the captives;
- he opens the prison to those who are bound;
- he comforts all who mourn;
- he proclaims the year of the Lord's favour.
Throughout the 3 years of his public ministry, Christ kept on that theme and acted on it. He is the hope of mankind. He brings Salvation or Liberation for all - liberation of both soul and body. He calls this the work of the Father (John 5:18). He works that we may have life and that more abundantly. He wants his followers to participate in his work, the work of God - liberation of the whole man. The liberation of the whole man can be regarded as social development. Pope Paul VI called it the bridge to peace. Consequently involvement in social development is the work of God. Hence it is an activity that Christian Youths must embrace wholeheartedly.

*Presented to the Catholic Youth Council Odoakpu Onitsha, during the Catholic Youth Week Celebration, August 1979.