




# Assessing the Role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Education and Socio-Economic Development of Meru County, Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

The success and development of each nation are based on the tenets which are cherished by its populace. This is partly expressed in the way they subscribe to their religious and socio-cultural values, which in turn promote social economic development. This article examined the role of the Roman Catholic Church in fostering the well-being of people in Meru County in Kenya. The research was guided by the following question: What role has the Roman Catholic Church played in the social economic development of the people in Meru County? Two theories, namely the Hybrid Quasi Theory and the Complementary Theory were employed to contextualize the research findings. The purposive sampling technique was utilized to select thirty participants who participated in the study. Questionnaires containing both open and closed-ended items were administered to the clergy from the thirty sampled parishes of the Roman Catholic Church in Meru County. The findings revealed that the church has partnered with the national and county governments to transform the Ameru people's lives. This study highlighted the need for both the government and non-governmental development agencies to frequently consult with the church in advancing development. This study will benefit the people of Meru, the Roman Catholic Church and other churches, academicians and in particular scholars of religion and persons in social and economic positions of decisive influence. The study further creates an awareness to the ordinary populace of Meru County that the church not only enhances their spiritual well-being but also acts as an agent of social, economic and political development.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Meru (also known as Ameru) are Eastern Bantus who inhabit Tharaka Nithi, Meru and some parts of Isiolo Counties of Kenya. They comprise Imenti, Tigania, Igembe, Chuka, Miutini, Muthambi, Igoji, Tharaka and Mwimbi sub-ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, the Ameru people are agriculturalists who cultivate maize, millet, sorghum, beans, bananas, yams, potatoes, and millet as their subsistence crops.<sup>2</sup> But, they also grow coffee, tea, khat-*mira*, and cotton as their cash crops in addition to keeping cattle, sheep, and goats. In recent years, they have diversified into various professions and businesses, including trade, education, and diverse forms of employment. The Ameru have a rich and diverse culture which is characterized by traditions, ceremonies, music, dance, and unique traditional attire. They emphasize family and community values. In the indigenous set-up, they subscribed to their traditional African religions and beliefs which involved reverence for their ancestors, spirits, and natural elements. The missionaries who gradually moved into the Meru region affected the historical,

<sup>1</sup> T.Mauta, *Retracing the Footsteps of Ameru and their Sub Tribal Differences* (Nairobi: Nkubitu Publishing Company, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Mauta, *Retracing the Footsteps of Ameru and their Sub Tribal Differences*.

cultural and socioeconomic practices of the inhabitants of this County. The local people who were observing their traditional religion had most of their beliefs and practices either challenged or in some cases, they were replaced by Christian teachings and values. Initially, the Ameru were headed by a chief religious leader (*Mugwe*) who acted on behalf of God and interceded for his people on important religious occasions.<sup>3</sup> They had also a council of elders (*Njuri Ncheke*) which assisted the religious leader in dispensing his functions to the society.<sup>4</sup>

However, the influence of Christianity and Islam has led many Ameru to adopt these two religions, although Christianity is the dominant one in this region. During the colonial era, the Ameru faced the impacts of British colonial rule and the coming of Christian missionaries at the beginning of the 20th Century.<sup>5</sup> Different Christian denominations had varying levels of success in spreading their faith among the Ameru. They were led by the Methodist Church and Consolata Catholic Missionaries who arrived at Thigaa and Kinja on 9th December 1911.<sup>6</sup> By 1913, Consolata Catholic Missionaries had established Mission Stations in Igoji, Mujwa, Tigania and Igembe-Amung'enti.<sup>7</sup> The Prefecture Apostolic of Meru which was established in 1926 was later elevated to become the Diocese of Meru on 7th May 1953 as a suffragan of the Archdiocese of Nyeri.

Bestone Lorenzo who was appointed as the first Bishop in 1954 helped in the construction of churches and the establishment of new mission stations in the new diocese. When Bishop Lorenzo died in 1976, Silas S. Njiru was commissioned as the second and first African Bishop of Meru Diocese. In 2004, Salesius Mugambi was selected as the second African Bishop, a position he holds to date 2024. Recent statistics from the Roman Catholic Church's Meru Diocese indicate that six hundred thousand (600,000) people out of the Ameru population of 1,545,714 are affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup>

The missionaries cooperated with the colonial masters in ruling and converting the local Ameru population to Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Apart from engaging in preaching, teaching, medical services, and providing aid to the local people, they encouraged them to attend church services, started schools, and further introduced business ventures. These significantly affected the traditional social and economic development activities of the local inhabitants in Meru County. The purpose of this study was thus to assess the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the education and socioeconomic development of Meru County. The findings will be presented in the subsequent sections.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To underscore the Roman Catholic Church's role in the well-being of the Ameru in Meru county, the paper reviews pertinent literature on development, socio-economic development, theories of religion and development, religion and social economic development.

### Development and Socio-Economic Development

The term development has diverse meanings and can be explained in different contexts. First, it could be a process that creates progress, growth, positive change, or the addition of economic, environmental, physical, demographic, and social components.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the purpose of development is to improve the quality of life and expand or create local and regional income through gainful employment opportunities.<sup>11</sup> This ensures that environmental resources are not over-exploited or depleted. Secondly, development according to Amartya, employs a "capability approach", that enables people to attain the highest level of performance.<sup>12</sup> It grants them the freedom of social, economic, and family actions. This style was adopted by the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) in 1990 to reflect the Human Development Index.<sup>13</sup> It is the first situation that enables people to live a creative and healthy life. People are empowered to access resources which are needed for a decent standard of living.<sup>14</sup> The other aspects that contribute to human development are; gender equality and

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<sup>3</sup> S.Gituma, *The Catholic Church in Meru* (Nairobi: Franciscan Kolbe Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> David Maitai Rimita, *The Njuri-Ncheke of Meru* (Meru: Kolbe Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> F.Itobi, "The Contribution of Methodist Missionaries to the Development of Education in Igembe Region of Meru County, Kenya 1920-2010," *MEd Unpublished Thesis*, (Nairobi:Kenyatta University, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Mauta, *Retracing the Footsteps of Ameru and their Sub Tribal Differences*.

<sup>7</sup> Gituma, *The Catholic Church in Meru*.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Kenya. "Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2014," available at <http://survey3.knbs.or.ke>. 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Etim E Okon, "Christian Missions and Colonial Rule in Africa: Objective and Contemporary Analysis," *European Scientific Journal* 10, no. 17 (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Society for International Development - Israel . " What is development?" <https://sid-Israel.org> 11 February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Society for International Development - Israel . " What is development?"

<sup>12</sup> Sen Amartya, *Development as Freedom* (Anchor Books, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 1999* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Amartya, *Development as Freedom*.

environmental sustainability. Thirdly, Booth points out that development should first be human-centred to make the person a better human being. It should seek to promote the good of the whole person.<sup>15</sup> Fourth, Drewnowski defines development as a process of both qualitative change and quantitative growth of the social economic reality within a society or a given economy.<sup>16</sup> The above definitions of development are based on per capita income and could be realized through the availability of services and goods focusing on people's well-being.<sup>17</sup> Fifth, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development Studies on Development states that the levels of standards of living and their welfare are exhibited in terms of better housing conditions, good health, proper nutrition, enhanced transport system, and affordable education.<sup>18</sup>

The development of a region is in this way construed in terms of increased productivity, better employment opportunities, availability of social amenities, improved infrastructure and services, better standards of education, quality health care, and adoption of modern technology.<sup>19</sup>

Social economic development is a process that enables a community to improve its living conditions and provide for its various needs. Its purpose is to improve material prosperity and uplift people's living standards. It underscores observable changes in the quality of life and a reciprocal positive change in values.<sup>20</sup> This results in quality of life, good nutrition, health, education, transport, communication and technology.

### Theories of Religion and Development

The main role of religious institutions is spiritual nourishment, although they also participate in various social economic, and political development programmes. Many theories explain the role of religion in development.<sup>21</sup> But, to understand the place of the Roman Catholic Church in Meru County and other religious institutions in development, two theories are discussed. First is the quasi-hybrid theory which is applied to non-profit organizations. It places greater emphasis on voluntary, community, and charitable organizations and further underscores different tasks, their legitimacy, or resource environments.<sup>22</sup> This theory emerged as a result of institutions' endeavours to search for non-profits and new sources of revenue for their core missions. It further creates subsidiaries to generate revenue for the parent body.<sup>23</sup> Apart from the quasi-hybrid theory, the complementary theory advanced by Young emphasizes the need for one sector in society to engage with the other to achieve desired results which essentially connect and complement each other.<sup>24</sup> This theory explains the efforts employed by the Roman Catholic Church in Meru County in establishing varied initiatives to augment those of the government. There exist various sub-systems which include the government, family, health, education, law, media, and religion which are in the society's supra system.<sup>25</sup> These social conglomerates are interconnected and support each other.

Non-profit agencies, mosques and churches collaborate with the government and assist in discharging public services that are funded by their members.<sup>26</sup> Government expenditures and non-profit institutions are directly related and increase levels of activity. In some cases, non-government agencies push governments to change public policies and also be continuously accountable to the public for their operations. The government reciprocates by funding non-profit and non-governmental agencies, regulates their operations, and responds by instituting advocacy actions. The adversarial perspective does not postulate any specific relationship between the levels of non-governmental and government activities.

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<sup>15</sup> W. James Booth, *Memory, Historic Injustice, and Responsibility* (Routledge, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Jan Drewnowski, "Social Indicators and Welfare Measurement: Remarks on Methodology," *The Journal of Development Studies* 8, no. 3 (January 1, 1972): 77–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220387208421413>.

<sup>17</sup> Hisakazu Hiraoka, "Approaches for Systematic Planning of Development Projects (Anti-HIV/AIDS Measures)," 2002, 77–117.

<sup>18</sup> Donald V. McGranahan, *Contents and Measurement of Socio-Economic Development: An Empirical Enquiry*, vol. 10 (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1970).

<sup>19</sup> Hiraoka, "Approaches for Systematic Planning of Development Projects (Anti-HIV/AIDS Measures)."

<sup>20</sup> Dokun Oyeshola, "Development and Poverty: A Symbiotic Relationship and Its Implication in Africa," *African Journal of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicines* 4, no. 4 (2007): 553–58.

<sup>21</sup> Chris Skelcher and Steven Rathgeb Smith, "Theorizing Hybridity: Institutional Logics, Complex Organizations, and Actor Identities: The Case of Nonprofits," *Public Administration* 93, no. 2 (2015): 433–48.

<sup>22</sup> Kate Cooney, "The Institutional and Technical Structuring of Nonprofit Ventures: Case Study of a US Hybrid Organization Caught between Two Fields," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 17 (2006): 137–55.

<sup>23</sup> Maria Pia Paganelli, "Adam Smith and Economic Development in Theory and Practice: A Rejection of the Stadial Model?," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 44, no. 1 (2022): 95–104.

<sup>24</sup> Dennis R. Young, *If Not for Profit, for What?* (1983 Print Edition) Lexington Books, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Jona Mbaabu Karicha, Stephen I. Akaranga, and Telesia K. Musili, "The Roman Catholic Church, Education and Health Care Provision in Meru County-Kenya," *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 5, no. 1 (2022): 61–68.

<sup>26</sup> Antonio Ariza-Montes et al., "Editorial: The Future of Work in Non-Profit and Religious Organizations: Current and Future Perspectives and Concerns," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (December 8, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.623036>.

Non-government organizations may simultaneously fund and deliver services that the government is not able to offer.<sup>27</sup> They also advocate for policy changes within the government to enhance better delivery of services through pressurizing and oversight. In other instances, they deliver services that are assisted or otherwise financed by the government. Both theories explain the role of the Roman Catholic Church in providing many social development services to the inhabitants of Meru County.

The Roman Catholic Church educates, cares and feeds the poor, provides funds for their expenses, supports homes for the elderly, offers guidance and counselling, and participates in poverty eradication initiatives. It further creates purposeful jobs which are vital in social and economic development.

### **Religion and Social Economic Development**

Religion is not a remedy, but aspects of it can motivate as well as complement development.<sup>28</sup> The development of the whole person, especially of the most neglected in the community and the poor is the core element of evangelization. It is also the concern of many Churches and following in the trail of Jesus Christ as found in the Gospel according to St Luke 4: 18: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Every economic, political, social, cultural, and scientific program must be enlivened by the awareness of the excellence of each human being in society.

Religious institutions in various parts of the world have proved to be agents of funding, advocacy, innovation, social movements, and service delivery to individuals and communities. Local, national, and international Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) whose funding sources or motivation derive from their faith are in many areas significant providers of non-market goods, education, and service provision.<sup>29</sup> They have contributed to various aspects of human well-being and development as agents of funding, advocacy, innovation, social movements, and service delivery. This is exemplified in the efforts of the Catholic Relief Services, Aga Khan Development Network, Islamic Relief, Christian Evangelical Development Agency, and World Vision among many others which deliver key resources and services.<sup>30</sup>

Barro and Mc Cleary, argue that in many developing countries, some government programs are faith-based because there is no separation between the church and the state activities.<sup>31</sup> Marshal and Marsh underscore that in 1998 Jim Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, and the then Archbishop of the Canterbury, George Carey founded a World Faiths Development initiative to promote discussions among the World Bank, the IMF, and religious groups.<sup>32</sup> These discussions supported case studies and organized publications and workshops with faith and development leaders on themes like; the World's Development Reports, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), and in 2002, the Millennium Development Goals. Kariuki points out that, religious organizations are key in human development and health sectors.<sup>33</sup> Such organizations also participate in environmental preservation, media, micro-credit services, and agriculture. While some governments are retreating in development funding, it is plausible that faith-based organizations could be the main sectors that promote and finance development efforts. These emerging religious and humanitarian groups operate at every level of society and deal with problems related to poverty alleviation. Thomas argues that people from poor communities often voice a much higher degree of confidence in religious leaders and organizations than in their corrupt government, public sector welfare services, and secular organizations.<sup>34</sup> Faith-based organizations are very effective in seeking to establish a deep rapport with local communities. Riddell explains that Faith-based organizations have adopted a needs-based approach to identify the poorest members in low-income earning communities or use a right-based approach that emphasizes the aspect of human dignity.<sup>35</sup> Faith-based

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<sup>27</sup> Ariza-Montes et al., "Editorial: The Future of Work in Non-Profit and Religious Organizations: Current and Future Perspectives and Concerns."

<sup>28</sup> Sabina Alkire, "Dimensions of Human Development," *World Development* 30, no. 2 (2002): 181–205.

<sup>29</sup> Alkire, "Dimensions of Human Development."

<sup>30</sup> Tim Kelsall and Claire Mercer, "Empowering People? World Vision & 'Transformatory Development' in Tanzania," *Review of African Political Economy* 30, no. 96 (2003): 293–304; Bryant L Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Orbis Books, 2011); UNDP, *Human Development Report 1999*; S C Ilo, *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life*, G - Reference, Information and Interdisciplinary Subjects Series (Lexington Books, 2018), <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=0bCxtAEACAAJ>.

<sup>31</sup> Robert J Barro and Rachel M. McCleary, "Religion and Economic Growth" (National Bureau of Economic Research Cambridge, Mass., USA, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Marsh Marshall, *Organizations and Growth in Rural China* (St. Martin's Press, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> David Kariuki, "The Church's Role in Community Development," 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Jessica L Fraser-Thomas, Jean Côté, and Janice Deakin, "Youth Sport Programs: An Avenue to Foster Positive Youth Development," *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy* 10, no. 1 (2005): 19–40.

<sup>35</sup> Roger C Riddell, *Does Foreign Aid Really Work?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

organizations should help to empower local communities through community capacity building and other participatory mechanisms.

In Kenya, there are approximately 30,000 faith-inspired organizations that execute diverse development programs through established church structures, faith communities, and religious leaders' initiatives. These religious organizations are the most widespread, resilient and durable development partners.<sup>36</sup> Their origin could be traced to the colonial period when they played key roles in missionary organizations. The churches undertook diverse development roles in the early post-independence years when the human and financial resources capacity of the Kenyan government was limited. In addition to other faith actors, the churches have expanded their operational services and helped supplement and complement government services.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper applied both qualitative and quantitative research methods because of the flexibility in collecting, analysing and interpreting information and data. The sample size for the study consisted of 30 Roman Catholic Church Parishes in Meru County which were arrived at based on the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table.<sup>37</sup> The sampled respondents included the Roman Catholic Diocese of Meru 30 Parish Priests, Catholic School head teachers, administrators of 10 charitable institutions and 6 people in the Roman Catholic Church homes for the elderly. Purposive Sampling was applied in selecting the sample used for the study. Questionnaires and interview schedules were the main modes used to gather information for this study. The Parish Priests, administrators of catholic institutions sampled for this study and heads of schools run by the Roman Catholic Church were issued with questionnaires. These questionnaires consisted of close-ended and open-ended question items. The elderly people in the homes for the aged were interviewed since the majority of them could neither read nor write in the questionnaires. Secondary data was obtained from reading materials in the libraries, diocese and parish offices that are concerned with the study. The mixed methods approach was appropriate since the empirical data gathered from the field is important in analysing the socio-economic projects run by the Roman Catholic Church in Meru County. The data obtained from the field was corroborated with secondary data obtained from a literature search and formed findings for this study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In discussing the role of the Roman Catholic Church in Education and socio-economic development, religious institutions have historically been centres of learning and education. Many religious groups have established schools, colleges, and universities that provide education to individuals regardless of their faith background. The research has established that the Roman Catholic Church has partnered with the local community in diverse educational activities.

The background of education in the Meru Diocese dates back to the efforts of Fathers Aimo Boot, Tuselli, Balbo, and Olivero who arrived on 13th December 1911 in Meru.<sup>38</sup> They brought school desks and writing resources that were transported by sixty porters that were used to establish the first schools. A Girls' Elementary School and a Catechist Training Centre, which later developed to become the current Igoji Teachers Training College, were started at Igoji in 1915. The Consolata Missionaries established Bush schools during World War I (1914-1918) which enhanced the establishment of more primary schools.<sup>39</sup> By 1926, the Roman Catholic Church had established twenty boys' schools and twelve for girls, a Catechist Training College at Igoji. However, secondary schools were started after World War II between 1945 and 1960.<sup>40</sup>

The development of Catholic primary schools in Meru County, Kenya involves a combination of efforts by the Catholic Church, government support, and community engagement. These schools were established with the support of their congregants and external donors to provide quality education based on Catholic values and teachings. Over the years, the Catholic Church has invested in developing school infrastructure by building numerous primary schools to cater for the educational needs of the local population. This includes constructing classrooms, administration buildings, libraries, laboratories, and other necessary facilities to enhance the learning environment. This has played a significant role in contributing to the provision of quality education and the holistic development of learners.

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<sup>36</sup> Aid Worker Security Report, *Unsafe Passage: Road Attacks and Their Impact on Humanitarian Operations* (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2014), <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/Aid Worker Security Report 2014.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Robert V. Krejcie and Daryle W. Morgan, "Determining Sample Size for Research Activities," *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 30, no. 3 (September 2, 1970): 607-10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001316447003000308>.

<sup>38</sup> Gituma, *The Catholic Church in Meru*.

<sup>39</sup> Gituma, *The Catholic Church in Meru*.

<sup>40</sup> John Baur, *Two Thousand Years of Christianity in Africa*, (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1994), 17.

The Roman Catholic schools emphasize maintaining high educational standards and quality teaching. This is achieved by the appropriate implementation of the curriculum by trained and committed teachers which are augmented by well-planned extracurricular activities to ensure the delivery of a well-rounded education for learners. The schools incorporate modern educational technologies into their teaching methods which enhance learning outcomes and prepare learners to adapt to the digital world and to keep pace with modern technological advancements.

The development and gradual growth of Catholic primary schools in Meru County is a collaborative effort involving the Catholic Church, local communities, government bodies, and stakeholders. It results in sustained encouragement from society on the benefits of education, both to the consumers and the larger community. They all work towards providing quality education and holistic development to the learners in the region. However, specific initiatives and progress may vary based on the individual schools' needs and their unique circumstances.

Catholic primary schools integrate moral and ethical teachings based on Catholic principles into their curriculum. The learners are instilled with values such as compassion, integrity, and social responsibility. Catholic primary schools contribute to increasing access to education in the region by providing educational opportunities to children and providing scholarships and financial aid to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to support their education.

There are many private Roman Catholic Church best-performing primary and secondary schools in Meru County as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Best Performing Schools**

Name	Level	Location/ Parish
St. Paul's Primary School	Primary	Maua
Cottolengo Primary School	Primary	Laare
St. John's Boarding	Primary	Amungenti
St. Dorothy Primary School	primary	Mikinduri
Mfariji Girls Secondary School	Secondary	Mutuati
St Pius IX Seminary Secondary	Secondary	Nkubu

The priest in charge of St. Paul's primary school affirmed that the majority of Roman Catholic Church-run primary schools produce some of the top students in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education national examination. They then join national secondary schools and transit to various universities to pursue diverse courses. The learners, teachers, and school administration have over many years transformed Roman Catholic Church-run schools into bench-marking institutions. Here, other regional schools get new insights, suggestions, skills, and new pedagogical methods in which the performance and other principal aspects of education can be censured to grow and flourish in their respective learning institutions. Out of the thirty parishes that were sampled for this study, all except Limbine had one or more private or church-run primary schools.

The study findings revealed that there exist exemplary day and boarding primary and secondary schools which post sterling performance in national examinations in Meru County. Some of these schools are run by various Catholic Sisters who are stationed in the respective parishes. They include; St. Paul's Primary School in Maua Parish, Cottolengo Primary School in Laare Parish, St. John's Boarding in Amungenti Parish, St. Dorothy Primary School and Mfariji Girls Secondary School.

The Parish Priests who were interviewed affirmed that the key stakeholders' meetings with the school administrators resulted in the rapid development of Roman Catholic-run schools. These schools have each a population of above 1,500 pupils. Many learners traverse from different parts of the county to secure a place in these schools due to the quality of education that is offered there. The serene environment in which most Roman Catholic Church-operated schools are located, the presence of well-trained staff, and the humane subordinate staff who are concerned about pupil welfare have made many parents prefer enrolling their children in those schools. Some respondents attested that they preferred the Roman Catholic schools to many others because, upon their arrival at the schools' premises they were accorded a warm welcome. This is a clear exhibition of the trust that the Roman Catholic Church Schools have gained from the community that it serves.

A total number of 1600 workers are employed by the Roman Catholic Church Schools in the Diocese of Meru. Apart from these workers, the populace who reside near these schools supply foodstuff and provide auxiliary income-generating services that are beneficial to the schools. Catholic schools often encourage active participation and involvement from the local community. Parents, teachers, and community members

collaborate to support the schools' development activities which include fundraising activities and volunteer services. Catholic schools in Meru County collaborate with the Kenyan government to align their educational programs with national standards. This collaboration helps in accessing government funding and support services which enhances the overall quality of education.

Interaction with the parents from diverse schools established that the Roman Catholic Church-run schools in various regions have sought to eliminate illiteracy in the area. The learners who excel in secondary schools join public, and private universities and tertiary colleges in Kenya. The Church further strives to increase access to education, especially for disadvantaged and marginalized communities by providing scholarships, grants, bursaries, and other forms of financial assistance to underprivileged and deserving students in Meru County.

This support enables many students to access education and pursue their academic aspirations. Some of the students are admitted to Roman Catholic-sponsored teacher training colleges and vocational training institutions as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Training Colleges**

Name	Level	Location
Igoji Teachers College	Primary Teacher Education	Igoji Parish
Fr. Soldati College	Diploma in Secondary Education Early and Childhood Development Education	Maua Parish
Irene School	Garment Making and Tailoring	Imenti South
Kangeta Parish Carpentry Training Centre	Carpentry	Kangeta Parish

The Roman Catholic Church operates Teacher Training Colleges which offer courses in Certificate and Diploma courses in Primary Teacher Education, Diploma in Secondary Education, Early Childhood Development Education, carpentry, garment making and tailoring.

These colleges which are spread in Igoji, Maua, Imenti and Kangeta parishes prepare individuals for employment or entrepreneurship in their chosen fields. They offer low-cost quality education and training not only to privileged learners but sponsor children from poor backgrounds in society. The educational, technical and vocational education training institutions equip learners with practical skills and knowledge related to specific trades or industries.

The findings of the research established that most employees in these colleges are old boys and girls of these institutions. They are the most dependable workers who have contributed to promoting people's living standards in their neighbourhood. They have transformed the region by securing tenders in various development programmes in Meru County. Some parishes have vocational training institutions with driving schools which have equipped and helped the residents gain the requisite skills to operate motorcycles and minibusses. This has empowered the youth to sustain themselves through gainful employment. This has contributed to economic development by enhancing the employability and income-generating capacities of the local population.

Apart from providing education, technical, professional training and material support, the Roman Catholic Church empowers vulnerable members of society through various charitable groups. They are sponsored by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Meru and are spread in different parishes within the diocese.

Many religious organizations encourage their members to engage in charitable giving and donations to support a wide range of social causes. The solicited funds are channelled toward humanitarian efforts, poverty alleviation, disaster relief, and community development projects. This is illustrated in various programs which take care of marginalized groups of people and enable them to venture into small-scale business enterprises as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Charitable Groups**

Name	Service Offered	Location
Aid to the Church in Need	Helping less privileged	27 parishes
Caritas International	Social Economic Development	Diocese Headquarters
Catholic Home Missions	Home for the Elderly	Munithu

The charitable homes that are found in the Meru Catholic Diocese are funded through church collections and donations from well-wishers. They help the elderly by extending humanitarian services to them. The less privileged and elderly members are also assisted in settling their pending hospital bills. The genesis of these

charitable homes can be traced to the first orphanage which was started in 1918 for both boys and girls at Mujwa. Since then, the Catholic Diocese of Meru has established more orphanages in various parishes in Meru County to rescue and take care of needy children. They house the abandoned and HIV/AIDS positive children.

It is through these humanitarian efforts that the vulnerable members of society are not left to suffer under the care of unemployed family members or offspring who emigrate to urban areas in search of salaried employment. The list of various centres that cater for orphaned and abandoned children is illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4: Centres for Vulnerable Children**

Name	Type of Program	Location
Meru Children Home for orphaned and abandoned babies	Care of male and female orphans	Nkabune
Our Lady of Grace Children’s Home for orphaned girls	Care of orphan girls	Marimba
Consolata Boys and Girls Children’s Home for orphaned and street children	Care of orphans of all genders	Cathedral
St. Joseph Caring Place for street children	Rehabilitation of street children	Mitunguu
St. Francis Children’s Village for vulnerable children	Care of children without stable relatives	Ruiri
Mother Maria Zanelli Children’s Home for orphaned and abandoned babies	Care of orphans	Kibirichia
Good Shepherd Save a Child	Sponsoring the needy	Cathedral
AINAA Children’s Home for HIV-positive children	Care of HIV-positive children	Nchiru

It was revealed from the interviews with the Roman Catholic Church Priests, that there existed active programs to address the needs of orphans and street children in the Meru Diocese as presented above. During the Lent period, church members donate used and new clothes, foodstuffs, and money which is consolidated into a general benevolent kitty. The donated items are then channelled to the needy recipients by the designated parish leaders. In addition, the donated money is used to settle fees arrears and rehabilitate orphaned poor learners in Meru County as presented in Table 5.

**Table 5: Orphans Sponsored Programmes**

Name	Type of Program	Location
Children’s Homes Programs	Caring for orphaned children	Nkabune
Self-reliance programs	Economic Empowerment	Cathedral, Nchiru, and Ruiri Parishes
Formal Schooling	Social Empowerment	Ruiri, Kibirichia and Laare Parishes

There exist numerous women groups which are associated with the Roman Catholic Church in Meru County. Some of these groups support widows and single mothers from eleven support groups in various parishes as represented in Table 6.

**Table 6: Widows and Single Mothers Support Groups**

Name	Type of Program	Location/Parish
Kangeta Parish Catholic Women Widows Association	Social group	Kangeta
Maua Catholic Women Association of Widows and Single Mothers	Social group	Maua
Mikinduri Catholic Women’s Group	Social group	Mikinduri
St.Massimo Catholic Women’s Group	Self-empowerment	Mikinduri
Kianjai Catholic Women’s Association	Church group	Kianjai
Kibirichia Single Mothers Catholic Women Association	Social group	Kibirichia
Mutuati Catholic Women’s Association	Church group	Mutuati
Laare Catholic Women’s Association	Social group	Laare
Muthara Catholic Women’s Association of Widows and Single Mothers	Self-empowerment	Muthara



Igoji Single Mothers Catholic Women’s Association	Self-empowerment	Igoji
Ruiri Catholic Women’s Association	Social group	Ruiri

The diverse women's social groups which are presented above are spread in various parishes. They run beneficial programmes which are associated with widows and single mothers. These programmes are vital in assisting the affected vulnerable women to cope with challenges in their lives. The women are empowered to team up and participate in income-generating activities that help them to support their dependents.

Apart from assisting the disadvantaged women groups to adjust to the realities of life, the Roman Catholic Church has programs which are aimed at addressing the challenges related to orphans, abandoned children and those living on the streets of various town centres in Meru County as illustrated in Table 7.

**Table 7: Vulnerable Children’s Programmes**

Name	Type of Program	Location
Street Children Rehabilitation Program	Rehabilitating children picked from streets	Nchiru
Children’s Village Program	Care of poor children	Ruiri
SPARK Small Homes	Guidance and Counselling of drug addicts	Cathedral & Igoji
Day Care Centre Program	Feeding poor children	Nkubu
Children’s Homes Programs	Care of abandoned children	Tuuru & Chaaria

The research findings revealed that many street children who experienced challenges in their lives in the Meru Diocese as shown above required rehabilitation. Some Roman Catholic Church parishes run diverse programs that empower the youth to initiate drought response initiatives, the recovery process, disaster risk reduction, and feeding the vulnerable as illustrated in Table 8.

**Table 8: Youth Empowerment Programmes**

Name	Type of Program	Location
Games and Athletics	Youth Social Empowerment	26 parishes
Music Festivals	Youth Social Empowerment	21 parishes
Talent Show	Youth Social Empowerment	16 parishes
Youth Cultural Day Festival	Youth Social Empowerment	11 parishes
Guidance & Counselling	Youth Social Empowerment	14 parishes
Self-Reliance Training	Youth Economic Empowerment	All 30 parishes

Since the youth play a significant role in any growing economy in a country, the Roman Catholic Church has partnered with twenty-four youth groups in parishes within the Diocese of Meru. Funds are channelled from respective parishes to sponsor games, athletics, cultural and music festival presentations, and talent shows. The youth are also encouraged to initiate projects such as pig and chicken rearing, tending tree nurseries, and hiring of tents for social functions at a fee. The income that is derived from these ventures is used to support their upkeep on one hand and to support other parish programs on the other.

The Roman Catholic Church has well-trained priests and erudite counsellors who address issues related to the youth which include; sexual pervasion, homosexuality, lesbianism, and drug and substance abuse among others. The findings of this research established that the Roman Catholic Church in Meru County has Alcoholics Anonymous groups (AA) in many of its parishes. These groups help the youth and adults who are struggling to come out of problematic drinking and get sober with the support of daily meetings with their peers. They hold discussions on issues related to addictions. The Alcoholics Anonymous groups also grant women and men forums an opportunity to meet and share their experiences. They also provide the necessary steps to follow and and have helped many people from various parishes recover from addiction.

In addition to Alcoholics Anonymous groups, there exist functional rehabilitation programs which are involved in guidance, and counselling seminars, which are aimed at contributing to behavioural change. It is through these efforts that the Roman Catholic Church organizes frequent youth seminars on topical issues such as alcoholism, drug, and substance abuse to ensure the youth are pre-captured from involvement in behaviours that negatively affect their lives. In these seminars, trained experts are invited as guest motivational speakers. The Church has also initiated capacity-building programs where various speakers are invited to talk to the youth

on various ways that can make them become dependable members of society. Some of the topics that are covered include; decision-making and self-awareness. These programs enable them to manage stress and help to mitigate suicidal and depression-related cases. This form of empowerment has led to overall positive social responsibility and relationships.

The church has identified and hired qualified lawyers from reputable law firms to litigate against their pending court cases and curb land grabbing and exploitation by some unscrupulous family members of the deceased families as evidenced in Kagaene parish. In many parishes, the Roman Catholic Church clergy collaborates with church ministers from other neighbouring churches in addressing various vices which affect the community. This is facilitated through organized chiefs' meetings - *barazas* where the people are educated on the prevailing issues that affect the society. The clergy also spare some time and address schools' parents' meetings on diverse issues.

The Parish Priests who were interviewed attested that at every public assembly, whether it was during a burial service or a wedding ceremony, they took upon this opportunity to address issues associated with alcoholism, drug, and substance abuse in society.

Agriculture as a key component of the economy of the majority of people in Meru County involves growing *Khat-miraa*, coffee and tea farming as their major cash crops. They also cultivate maize, beans, horticultural crops, and fruits. Significant efforts have been made in this County to improve agricultural practices, enhance yields, and provide farmers with better access to markets and agricultural extension services. They are also involved in domestic animal restocking projects which have resulted in the ultimate goal of balanced, social economic development for the entire Ameru people. In some parts of the County where the rains are intermittent and the people can hardly sustain their lives, the Roman Catholic Church alleviates the hunger-stricken families by donating and offering food grants during the dry season.

Various church parishes operate adult literacy classes where members of the community are exposed to diverse ways of improving productivity on their farms, through value addition, agribusiness, profitable dairy farming and poultry keeping. These exposure programs are represented in Table 8.

**Table 9: Special/Empowerment Programmes**

Name	Type of Program	Location
Kamujine Farmers Training Centre	Dairy farming	Kunati Parish
Mukululu Winery	Value addition	Mukululu Shrine
Kangeta Parish Farmers Centre	Diversified Agriculture	Kangeta Parish
Moringa Products Processing	Agri-Business	Mbeu Parish

Training workshops are held in the parishes in Agri-business and entrepreneurship where qualified personnel impart diverse skills in farming and carpentry to the community members. The Kamujine Farmers Training Centre and other farmers training institutions were established to offer training in modern farming, horticulture, floriculture, milk, and beef cattle rearing. The populace is challenged to embrace the modern farming methods of using up-to-date equipment. This has in turn increased their farm harvests resulting in improved income and living standards for the residents. The local inhabitants are further empowered to sell their excess farm produce at competitive profitable prices and earn an income. This multi-dimensional approach has led to both social and economic development of the Ameru. In addition, the church through the Diocese of Meru office, collaborates with International Organizations such as the United Nations(UN) to mitigate against drought and adverse climatic changes. They train members of society on ways of addressing the effects of global warming and shunning deforestation. The Roman Catholic Church parish leaders also visit their church members and advise them on how to dig pit latrines and construct and maintain modern toilets to alleviate spreading the of contagious water-borne diseases such as dysentery and cholera.

## CONCLUSION

A person's needs incorporate spiritual life, creativity, self-determination, emotions, and social-political interactions which are integral to human development. The effects of social-economic development transcend the material and physical world. The centrality of humanity in development was accentuated during the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) when the whole world committed itself to development.<sup>41</sup> The Roman Catholic Church has a long history of establishing and managing educational and social institutions in Meru

<sup>41</sup> United Nations, *World Summit for Social Development* (Department of Economic and Social Affairs Social Inclusion, 1995), <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/world-summit-for-social-development-1995.html>.

County. They have set up numerous primary and secondary schools to provide education to children from various backgrounds. These schools not only focus on academic excellence but also emphasize moral and ethical values, character development, and a sense of social responsibility.

The Roman Catholic Church's involvement in education, community development, advocacy, and humanitarian efforts has made a substantial contribution to the socio-economic development and overall improvement of the quality of life in Meru County in Kenya. There are various social economic development programs in Meru County in which the Roman Catholic Church is involved in a partnership with the government. These initiatives cut across all the sectors and categories of people in the society. The Church initiates and supports community development projects aimed at empowering the community, particularly women and youth. These projects include income-generating activities, vocational training, agricultural programs, and entrepreneurship initiatives, which contribute to poverty reduction and sustainable development. They have provided water, established education institutions, supported programs for the youth, helped the widows, and the poor, created jobs through their initiatives, sensitized HIV/AIDS victims, integrated with them and provided socio-economic development activities.

The inhabitants are provided with opportunities to handle life experiences and strengthen their general conduct and character. This holistic approach addresses various needs within the community and fosters growth and positive social change. Since the human person is so essential, the development of people has the church's close attention. It must focus on the development of those people who are striving to escape from ignorance, hunger, endemic, misery, and diseases. The church must continue to underscore the benefits of civilization and seek active indulgence in the human qualities aimed at fostering self-actualization. It must advocate for social justice and address issues pertinent to development which include poverty, inequality, and human rights abuses. It is through preaching, pastoral letters, and community engagement, that awareness is raised towards a more just and equitable society.

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