

SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES OF PRIORITY IN NIGERIA IN THE LIGHT OF AMOS 5:24: IMPLICATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Amos' call for justice (Amos 5:24) is in the context of various forms of social injustices prevalent in Israel at the time. There are undeniable commonalities between Amos' context and contemporary Nigerian society. Amos' call ostensibly seeks a deliberate prioritization of social justice and righteousness as disruptive alternatives to injustice and marginalization in his days. This study aims to read Amos 5:24 in exploring the possibility of prioritizing social justice as a key intervention to driving sustainable development in Nigeria. The paper uses the critical social theory approach. It argues that any attempt at sustainable national development is a leap in the dark when social justice is relegated and undermined. The study finds significant similarities between the contexts of Amos 5:24 and the prevailing social justice conditions in Nigeria. It also finds that poverty, inequitable distribution of resources, poor healthcare, and discrimination in varying forms, among others, are social injustices at their tipping points in Nigeria. The Paper concludes that, like Amos' call, it is important that the issues of social justice are addressed as matters of national priority.

Keywords: Amos 5:24, Justice, Righteousness, Social justice, Sustainable development

Introduction

Amos, a herdsman from Tekoa was perhaps the most critical of the socio-political decay in northern Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. Amos 5:24 has been a favored text for contextualization of justice in biblical scholarship (Udoekpo, 2017). Over the years, the word justice has come to assume different meanings. Scholars have used two basic distinctions of distributive justice and commutative justice in explaining the dimensions of justice. While the first is concerned with fair sharing or equitable distribution of things like material resources, and power, among others, in a society, commutative justice or retributive justice on the other hand is concerned with fair dealings between people in the society, including giving people what they deserve in terms of punishment for crimes and reward for honorable conduct (Houston, 2006). Social justice, as an aspect of justice, more generally presupposes actions of helping the poor, caring for people who lack care, speaking for the oppressed in society, and addressing issues of diversity and oppression, among others. It includes exposing injustice and confronting the established institutions that sponsor oppression in society, highlighting such issues as health, women's education, gender, environment, opportunities, and inequalities, among others, as major areas of concern. The call for unhindered justice in Amos 5:24 apparently encompasses all forms of justice.

The current happenings in Nigeria suggest that there is no serious concern about ensuring social justice in the country. Although gamuts of recommendations exist on the way

forward from this situation in the academic cycle, there are little or no significant interventions from critical stakeholders in addressing issues of social injustices in the country (Udoekpo, 2017). The persistence of mass poverty, oppression, and subjugation of vulnerable groups in the country attests to the assertion that social justice is currently not a priority in Nigeria. While some countries tenaciously pursue social justice as a key ingredient to their development, Nigeria seems to lag. To effectively address the several challenges existing especially in Nigeria as a nation, there is the need for a renewed commitment to ensure social justice. This is important for the reason that social justice has become a critical international metric in the determination of political, economic, development, and well-being of people across the world. This study, therefore, advocates the prioritization of social justice in Nigeria's quest for sustainable development using Amos 5:24 as a framework.

Conceptual and Methodological Concerns

Miller (2021) subscribes to the definition of justice offered by the *Institute of Justinian*, as the constant and perpetual will to render to each what they are due. The coverage areas of justice, according to him, include how individual people are treated, a matter of claim that can be rightfully made, and impartiality in its application in contrast to arbitrariness. Social justice as an aspect of justice entails the idea that every individual in society should have equal access to opportunities, rights, and resources regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status. Social justice aims to create a fair and just society where everyone has equal rights and opportunities to thrive and succeed. It involves the promotion of human rights, equality, and justice for all members of society; while seeking to address social inequalities and systemic injustices that exist in society, such as poverty, discrimination, and oppression (Chikane 2013; Madzokere 2018; Beer 2019).

Critical social theory as an approach was first formulated by its founders (Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, and Marcuse) as a method of investigating both theoretical and concrete social problems. Its beginning as a theoretical approach is rooted in a radical re-imagination of social forms of life. It seeks new ways of engaging social issues rather than maintaining the status quo (Ngwenyama, 1991). The method is concerned with creating alternatives to extant social conditions that most appropriately address human needs. Herein lies its difference from the traditional critical social theory, which accepts existing social conditions and contributes to their preservation (Ngwenyama, 1991). The critical social theory as a method is executed in social research along some fundamental suppositions from which this study picked one, namely, that people are the creators of their social conditions and, as such, they are responsible for the changes they desire. In other words, societies are the architects of their social destinies or outcomes. This aligns significantly with the reading and interpretation of Amos 5:24, which ultimately sought a change in the social conditions of the day through justice and righteousness.

Contextual Interpretation of Amos 5:24

Amos is perhaps the most vehement of the 8th-century prophets of Israel, whose message clearly denounced the social injustices prevalent in his era. If his prophetic ministry is placed between c 760-755 BCE as many biblical scholars suggest, it would then imply that Amos must have been a contemporary of Isaiah and Micah, two other leading voices of Israel's prophets who confronted the egregious corruption and injustices of their day

(Stamp, Adams, Verbrugge, Buursma, *et al*, 2003; Coote, 2005; Barton, 2012). The reigns of King Uzziah in Judah and King Jeroboam II Samaria overlapped in Israel's history. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was at its peak in terms of political expansion. While the nation outwardly witnessed some political peace and prosperity, the period was however marked with religious and social decay internally. Apostasy, immorality, corruption, oppression of the poor and other marginalized groups by the ruling elites, and other injustices were commonplace in society. Amos' prophetic oracle came in this context, insisting on radical changes in society through justice and righteousness (Coote, 2005; Barton, 2012).

Amos 5:24 unequivocally reads, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream.” The two keywords in the text are justice and righteousness. According to Heschel (1962) מִשְׁפָּט (*Misphat*, “justice”) could appropriately translate as justice, norm, ordinance, legal right, and law. צְדָקָה (*Sadaq*), on the other hand, means “righteousness.” While legal justice and righteousness are not identical, they coincide in that righteousness is reflected in legality, and both terms are used as variants in Hebrew parallelism. It is plausible to see justice as “a mode of action” while righteousness is “a quality of the person.” (Heschel, 1962)

Heschel (1962) goes further to state that righteousness transcends justice and argues that while justice is strict and exact, demanding or insisting that people get what they are due, righteousness portends benevolence, kindness, and generosity. Again, justice seeks equilibrium and could be based on legality, whereas righteousness is always connected with a strong compassion for the oppressed. This is shown in such texts as Deuteronomy 24:10-13 where what is legally right is different from mercy and compassion towards the poor. Hence, divine justice is no less than Yahweh being merciful and compassionate towards humans (Is. 30:18). Concerning human relationships, justice only becomes justice when clad in compassion. God is not only the source of justice but also shows ethical compassion. In essence, Amos's call for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:24), should be seen as a plea for not only individual righteousness but also social justice. It challenges the people to live righteous lives and to create a just society by addressing economic and social inequalities.

Merkie's (2022) review of Heschel's (1962) classic again brings to light that divine pathos is the central theme of *the prophets*, embracing all life, past, present, and future. The prophets of Israel were at the heart of God's call for justice not only among the people of Israel but for the world. The prophets themselves sometimes present God's demand for justice in harsh, punitive tones, but their readers in all ages must understand that God's compassion and mercy are the drives for the prophetic oracles.

Achtemeler (1986) explains that righteousness in the Old Testament, including in Amos 5:24, means the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, whether that relationship be with men or with God. According to him, relationship exists at various levels. For instance: a ruler has a relationship with the people he governs; the judge has with the plaintiffs; the priests with the worshipers; there are levels of relationships within the family circle; tribesmen have a relationship with the community; the community have a relationship responsibilities to the strangers within it; and all have relationships with God. Simply put, justice and righteousness in the Old Testament happen when God or man satisfies the demand imposed upon him by a relationship.

Recently, Holladay (2022) copiously subscribes to Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* and *Theology of the Old Testament*, which emphasizes justice and righteousness within the context of the Old Testament's social ethics. In examining some songs by the Indigo Girls and some OT texts, Holladay is able to show that there is a strong link between justice and peace on the one hand and human rights and justice on the other hand. He adds further that the justice advocated by the OT prophets as a case, is different from the often legalistic idea of justice. Rather, it is the justice concerned with humanitarianism. Similarly, Ahrens (2022) posits that we must understand that Yahweh's justice, as spelled out in Amos 5:24, is a torrent that insists on a clean sweep of all forms of injustice. Justice in this sense, according to Ahrens (2022), is to act as advocates and defenders of the powerless and marginalized. The intense demand for actions in pursuit of justice and righteousness is rooted in God's desire for His people to live out His character by treating others justly.

According to Udoekpo (2017), one of the best ways to appreciate the contextual significance of Amos' prophetic oracle on social justice in contemporary times is by looking at the struggle of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. and how he adapted Amos' message and theology to address myriads of social injustices against the black community in the United State. For Martin Luther King Jr. "justice rolling down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream" meant the guarantee of civil rights and justice for the people of color in the context of the ongoing struggle of his day. The text, when appropriated in the Nigerian context could further reveal the interpretive significance of Amos 5:24 (Udoekpo, 2017)

Social Justice Issues of Priority in Nigeria

Many different social justice issues impact individuals and communities around the world. In the case of Nigeria as a nation some of these issues are particularly prevalent, reaching their tipping points. In recent studies, researchers have shown that the majority of Nigerians consider social justice problems the main hindrance to national development (Idemudia, 2024; Udoekpo, 2017) Here, the study focuses its discussion on a few of the social justice issues that constitute a hindrance to the developmental agenda of the nation such as economic inequality, poor remuneration of workers and poverty, insecurity of lives, diversity and ethnic discrimination, gender inequality, and environmental justice.

Economic Inequality and Poverty as Social Injustices in Nigeria

Economic inequalities entail unequal distribution of wealth and resources. It usually results in poverty of sections of the society. This is a major social justice problem that continues to plague Nigerian society today. Consequently, many citizens of the nation lack sufficient resources and access to basic needs, such as food, water, and shelter, necessary for survival and well-being. The nation's wealth – 'national cake' in the social lexicon of Nigerians is only shared by an insignificant percentage of the population.

Economic inequalities mostly result from poor remuneration of workers, wage gaps, lack of workplace opportunities, and poor work conditions. Many Nigerians blame the problem of mass poverty on the injustice of the government's neglect of workers in the country (Isiramen, 2010; Onimhawo and Adamu, 2011). A host of others have questioned the unjustifiable gap between the earnings of political officeholders and the rest of the working population of the country as injustice.

Globally, one of the indexes used in the determination of the development of any nation is the overall standard of living of its people. There is an intertwining of many other economic factors that are used in measuring the actual standard of living of a people. One of these is the per capita theory – the actual money worth of a person in terms of earnings within a specific period of time, usually a year. Today, about half of Nigeria's population is under the poverty line (Bukola, 2018, par. 1). Nigeria has already overtaken India as the country with the largest number of extremely poor people in early 2018 with about 87 million people in extreme poverty compared to India's 73 million (Adekunle, 2018, par. 1-2). The figure continues to soar. In 2022, 63%, that is about 133 million people were said to be living in multidimensional poverty (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022)

Ultimately, a people's standard of living is tied to what they earn. It follows, according to Anker and Anker (2017), that a fundamental determinant of people's well-being is whether they, regardless of their occupation and occupational status, are paid at least a living wage for their efforts. A living wage is “a wage level that offers workers the abilities to support families, to maintain self-respect, and to have both the means and the leisure to participate in the civic life of the nation” (ix) Onimhawo and Adamu (2011) note that irrespective of the indices that are used to measure development, the fact remains that for any meaningful and sustainable growth there must be improvement both in the area of personal income and improvement in the standard of living. Justice, therefore, demands that the creation of living wage jobs should be core to any policy agenda that is genuinely committed to raising the living standard for working people and the poor in every country (Anker and Anker, 2017).

Security as Social Justice in Sustainable Development in Nigeria

A significant aspect of modern social justice course and agitation across the globe is the one that borders on the security of lives and the need for safety in societies and communities. There is a link between security, justice, and sustainable development in that justice gives rise to security, which, in turn, could have a huge impact on sustainable development. Ultimately, however, security and justice are linked in social justice discourse on the ground that human security and safety are pivotal to any meaningful development. Thus, a people-oriented notion of security must take into account the collective as well as the individual entitlements to freedom from fear and an equal opportunity to enjoy all the rights and privileges afforded in society. A people-centered notion of security must also deliberately seek out vulnerable groups for protection and provide the enabling environment to maximize their human potential (UNGA, 2005, p. 31).

At the international scale, the Department for International Development (DFID), now merged and replaced by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) of the United Kingdom, aptly captions the social justice dimensions of security and justice in their 2007 briefings thus: “security and justice ... refer to values and goals (e.g. freedom, fairness, personal safety) as well as to the various institutions established to deliver them (e.g. defense forces, police, courts)” (DFID, 2007, p. 10). According to the DFID (2007):

An environment where the rule of law is respected and security bodies are under the control of civilian authorities will help people feel safe and secure and encourage them to claim their rights as citizens. Conversely, where there is no

effective and accountable national security structure, violence can permeate society, and injustice can prevail (p. 10).

Unfortunately, the converse situation in the above has been the experience of Nigeria over the last two decades. Today, violent crimes such as militancy, kidnapping, bombing, armed robbery, banditry, killing, and destruction of private and public property, among others, now pervade Nigerian society. Again, police brutality, compromised defense forces, and human rights violations, among others, have resulted in a situation where citizens no longer feel safe in the country. Many now consider the country too insecure to guarantee their safety and help in the realisation of their potential. The growing notion that the government in recent times has become insincere in the fight against insecurity is leading to the mass migration of not only individuals but foreign investors and their firms from Nigeria (Ahiamadu and Idemudia, 2020).

Environmental Justice as Social Justice in Nigeria

Environmental justice is that part of social justice that deals exclusively with the environment. It fundamentally centers on the positive as well as negative effects that various human activities could have on the environment and human communities. As part of social justice, which seeks the fair treatment of individuals and groups, environmental justice recognizes the fact that there are environmental advantages as well as disadvantages and that unhealthy human activities tend to put some people groups at grave disadvantage compared to others. For instance, industrialization and industrial waste, land, water, air, and noise pollution pose grave environmental concerns in many places across the globe (<https://bencrump.com/environmental-justice>). Unfortunately, as Idemudia and Tenebe (2021) lament, humans are simultaneously the active cause of all forms of environmental degradation and the worst-hit victims of the devastating effects.

Humans are apparently at the center of justice or injustice. It is human actions that constitute environmental justice as well as environmental injustice. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), environmental justice involves:

Fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, natcolororigin or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

For EPA above, any action that is contrary to the development, implementation, and enforcement of healthy environmental policies constitutes environmental injustice (<https://bencrump.com/environmental-justice>). As has been pointed out, environmental injustice could have detrimental hazardous effects on people and their communities, especially underprivileged minority groups (<https://bencrump.com/environmental-justice>). In the case of Nigeria, which plays host to several multinational oil companies, no precaution is observed in the exploration and exploitation of crude oil in the land. Ahiamadu (2020) already notes that the peculiar ecological terrain of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is already compromised by multinational oil conglomerates who according to him, are completely oblivious of the religion, customs, and manners of the diverse ethnic groups in the region. The mode of operation of the likes of Total, Shell, Texaco, Agip, Chevron, Exxon-Mobil, and their Nigerian collaborators, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), is such that it disregards the laws, morals, and ethics portrayed in the culture and customs of the Niger Delta people and even the

Nigerian constitution.

Ahiamadu (2020) agrees with Freitheim, who earlier described the senseless and unbridled exploration and exploitation of natural resources by multinational conglomerates as international “terrorism” and states that such environmental and ecological terrorism results from a human-above-nature mindset. Such a mindset, Ahaimadu asserts, shows no regard for ecological integrity and environmental cleanliness that once characterized African societies. Today, the larger part of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria suffers ecological destruction, the devastation of nature, and untold environmental pollution perpetrated by the multinationals. It is a well-known fact also that the verdant mangrove forest, one of the world's largest, has been drastically depleted by the activities of crude oil exploitation such as drilling installations, flow stations, access routes, and pipeline constructions, among others. These activities have displaced people from their patrimonial lands, destroyed locals' farmlands, polluted water, and rendered fishing activities practically impossible, leading to wildlife destruction and the extinction of some wildlife species (Ahiamadu, 2020, p. 6).

The researcher, in the course of this study, experienced first-hand the very discomforting problem of black soot in Port Harcourt and other parts of the Niger Delta region, which, according to residents, is the direct effect of excessive industrial gas flaring in the area. It is not uncommon to see buildings originally painted with white color turning to almost black as a result of black soot pollution of the air. It is a common thing for people who are not familiar with that part of the country to develop catarrh and nasal congestion. Although the problem is considered a serious environmental challenge, it is quite unfortunate that not so much is known about the health implications of inhaling this substance over a long term long-term period. The silence about the problem in both print and other media is reflective of the unjust suppression of the issue by the perpetrators.

Gender Justice as Social Justice in Nigeria

Gender justice as social justice refers to the fair and equal treatment of individuals of all genders, and the recognition and elimination of gender-based discrimination, inequality, and oppression. It is a fundamental aspect of social justice, which seeks to ensure that all members of society have access to the same rights, opportunities, and resources regardless of their gender (UN WOMEN 2012).

Gender justice is concerned with challenging and changing the cultural and social norms, institutions, policies, and practices that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and inequality. It recognizes that gender is not just a biological fact, but is also a social construct shaped by cultural, economic, and political factors (UNDP 2023). Gender justice seeks to address a range of issues, including unequal access to education, employment, health care, and political representation, as well as violence and harassment based on gender. It recognizes that these issues affect individuals differently based on their gender identity, and seeks to address the specific challenges faced by marginalized and oppressed genders.

This study takes the issue of the marginalization of women in both economic and political spaces in Nigeria to be a form of social injustice. Generally, the marginalization of women is complex and multifaceted across different societies and cultures. It is important to note

that the marginalization of women is not inevitable or natural and that, like other social injustices, it can and should be addressed through policies, education, and cultural changes. For instance, the patriarchal structure of the Nigerian society, in which men hold both economic and political powers to the almost exclusion of women, needs to be collapsed for women to ascend to power and authority as well. Also, gender stereotypes, such as the idea that women are emotional and nurturing, while men are strong and rational, are irrelevant in today's context. These stereotypes only pose limitations to women's opportunities and influence.

Diversity and Ethnic Justice in Nigeria

The issue of diversity and ethnic minorities is a social justice issue in Nigeria. Nigeria became a nation following the integration of varied ethnic nationalities and regional amalgamations (Erhagbe 2002). It is a known fact that Nigeria is home to over 250 ethnic groups, with three main ethnic groups - the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo - comprising the majority of the population. However, regional proclivities for political hegemony by the so-called majority groups in the country have often played out in the marginalization and exclusion of smaller ethnic groups from political, social, and economic power (Ogedegbe and Idemudia, 2012).

In Nigeria, the discrimination and marginalization of ethnic minorities are seen glaringly in political representation and access to resources. Many ethnic minority groups are underrepresented in political leadership and are often excluded from decision-making processes that affect their communities. Again, ethnic minorities also face social injustices in the form of discrimination in accessing national privileges such as employment opportunities, education, health care, infrastructural development, and other social needs. In many cases, ethnic minorities in Nigeria also face barriers to accessing justice and legal protections, as the justice system tends to be biased against them. A major challenge arising from the situation above is the emergence of ethnic/armed militias across Nigeria. These militias use extreme forms of ethnic agitation for self-determination and in their attempt to call for justice (Badmus, 2006).

Implications of Amos 5:24 as Framework for Prioritizing Social Justice Nigeria

It is a robustly attested position that the assurance of social justice is itself a guarantee of sustainable development in any society (Koukouvelis, 2012; Joshua, 2017; Yang and O'Neil, 2019). The issues of wages and remuneration that affect the human person are directly social justice issues. Amos 5:24 sees justice as a key to an ideal society that includes sustainable development. In thinking sustainable development, there is the need to maintain a balance in social order. For instance, there is a relationship between the government and the people – a social contract requiring the fulfillment of responsibilities. There is also a relationship between employers and employees, etc. The fulfillment of these social contracts, especially in addressing the injustice of workers' poor wages and remunerations, is a critical aspect of social justice that could ultimately translate to sustainable development in Nigeria.

This research, in its assessment of the concept of justice in Amos 5:24, abundantly shows that justice is inclusive and always calls for correction and balance in a situation of injustice. One of the proper interpretations of the text is a conscientious consideration of the other. In contemporary times, this will mean prioritizing efforts that address economic

inequalities and poverty as critical social justice issues in society. This will require deliberate attention to changing discriminatory policies and practices that perpetuate poverty among the larger section of society. Justice in this understanding will include access to economic opportunities for every citizen and just distribution of national resources.

One of the causes of underdevelopment in Nigeria is insecurity, which is rooted in various levels of injustice in the country (Nwagboso 2012). Justice must be emphasized in the maintenance security structure of the nation. This research has shown that the intent of justice, as seen in Amos 5:24, is to strengthen harmonious human relations and ensure a society where fairness is established as a norm. Amos 5:24 ostensibly instills that justice is with the clear interest of protecting the society against any act capable of fracturing existing harmony and acts that negate the security and safety of the lives of the people. It is, therefore, important that insecurity is addressed as a matter of national priority for sustainable development.

Justice in the sense of Amos 5:24 also implies deliberate efforts by all stakeholders to engage in the development, implementation, and enforcement of policy actions that will change the unhealthy activities of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta region as well as other areas in the country that are suffering from unhealthy environmental practices. It is only just that the government and other stakeholders in Nigeria think through possible changes in actions and practices that predispose our environment to further degradation. For us, it is also a just thing to do in view of environmental justice in Nigeria to encourage biodiversity in a natural ecosystem with a focus on forestation, rivers and ocean cleaning, sustainable agro practices, relocation, and compensation of locals affected by environmental injustices over the years, among others.

It is also clear that the voice of justice and fairness in Amos 5:24 is on the side of gender justice in Nigeria. Justice in the light of this research is against both economic and political oppression and suppression of women. Justice here calls for a balance in society between men and women with regard to access to resources and opportunities without discrimination. 5:24 is also valid as a framework for prioritizing justice as fairness. The tenets of the text negate that any segment of society is perpetually placed at a disadvantage. A proper interpretation of justice in this context and as this study advocates will be in favor of a concerted effort by relevant stakeholders in addressing the problem of marginalization of ethnic minorities in Nigeria and the promotion of equal representation, access to resources, and protections under the law for all ethnic groups, regardless of size or level of political power. The prioritization of social justice, as shown in this paper, could be a sure catalyst for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Amos 5:24 preserves enduring principles that could be adapted in contemporary discourse on justice and social justice in any society. Particularly, the text resonates with the endemic situation of social injustices in Nigeria. Nigeria seems to be groping in the dark in its effort to achieve sustainable development without prioritizing critical social justice issues in the nation. The perception of the government's insincerity in addressing social justice problems is widespread among the population. Poverty

alleviation programs often end up deepening the rate of poverty in the country. The nation has progressively gotten worse due to uncoordinated efforts at fixing the nation's most pressing problems. On the scale of priority, this work has identified poverty, inequitable distribution of resources, discrimination and marginalization, and poor healthcare, among others, as social injustices needing urgent intervention and change in Nigeria. Prioritizing these social justice issues not only aligns with the ethical and moral imperatives of Amos 5:4 but would also fuel the nation's aspiration for sustainable development.

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