# Human-Centered Economic Development in Nigeria and its Socio-Religious Implications

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**Abstract**

The study investigates the importance of integrating human-centered economic development with socio-religious values in Nigeria. It critiques the prevalent focus on material growth that neglects ethical and spiritual aspects, fostering societal challenges like inequality, corruption, and diminished social cohesion. Employing Max Weber's Social Action Theory, the paper analyzes how Christian ethical principles such as love, honesty, stewardship, and service influence individual and communal behaviors that contribute to inclusive development. It showcases practical examples including church-led educational institutions, Christian health services, and faith-based empowerment initiatives that embody these values. The study argues that embedding moral and spiritual values within economic policies and leadership fosters sustainable, equitable, and people-centered progress. Ultimately, it posits that Nigeria's holistic development requires a seamless blend of economic reforms and moral renewal rooted in human dignity.

**Keywords:** Human-centered development, Christian ethics, Social justice, Economic policy, Faith-based initiatives, socio-religious implications.

**Introduction**

Human-Centered Economic Development (HCED) is increasingly recognized globally as a paradigm that places human well-being, social equity, and sustainable prosperity at the core of economic growth strategies. Globally, there has been mounting evidence that traditional growth-centric models inadequately address inequalities and fail to secure long-term societal welfare (Nagan &Weeren, 2025). The global Human Development Index growth has slowed considerably post-pandemic, emphasizing the need for development approaches that emphasize human capital, socio-economic rights, and inclusive opportunities (UNDP, 2025). The human-centered approach challenges economic neoliberalism by advocating socio-economic rights and prioritizing human freedom, employment, and equality over pure capital accumulation (Nagan & Weeren, 2025). In this light, HCED incorporates multidimensional welfare measures such as education, health, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability, moving beyond simple GDP metrics (UNCTAD, 2021; Alekhina & Ganelli, 2020).

In the United States, HCED is aligned with broader socioeconomic development policies that emphasize equity, social entrepreneurship, and capability expansion (Uzzol, 2025; Alenda-Demoutiez, 2022). Challenges such as racial disparities, income inequality, and socio-religious marginalization have led to calls for inclusive economic frameworks that integrate human capital development with social justice goals (Uzzol, 2025). Efforts focus on decentralizing economic power, fostering community resilience, and leveraging social capital within diverse religious and ethnic groups to support education, workforce participation, and entrepreneurship (Alenda-Demoutiez, 2022). These approaches emphasize integrative governance, policy coherence, and human rights-based development frameworks for equitable growth (Alekhina & Ganelli, 2020).

Europe engages HCED through policies promoting digital inclusion, sustainability, and social cohesion, with cities acting as key agents in

implementing human-centered digital and economic transformation strategies (Eurocities, 2024; UNCTAD, 2021). The European Union underscores inclusive regional integration that links economic recovery with empowerment of marginalized social groups, gender equity, and environmental responsibility all pivoting on people-centric approaches in governance and trade policies (Eurocities, 2024; UNCTAD, 2021). Human capital development in Europe is increasingly linked with innovation, social entrepreneurship, and sustainability, highlighting the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Eurocities, 2024; UNCTAD, 2021).

In Africa, HCED resonates with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA) strategy aimed at inclusive growth by reducing inequalities, promoting regional integration, and empowering marginalized populations including women and youth (UNCTAD, 2021; Adeleye et al., 2020). Despite rapid economic growth in some regions, persistent high inequality and poverty necessitate human-centered frameworks that address social, economic, and environmental dimensions holistically (UNCTAD, 2021; Schoch & Lakner, 2020). Regional integration under AFCFTA is seen as a critical mechanism for generating decent employment, enhancing skills, and fostering equitable access to markets and productive resources across African nations (UNCTAD, 2021; Alekhina & Ganelli, 2020). The focus on partnerships, peace, and inclusive policy reforms align with the socio-economic human rights agenda central to HCED (UNCTAD, 2021; Nagan & Weeren, 2025).

Nigeria's human-centered economic development is multi-faceted, deeply intertwined with its diverse socio-religious fabric. Socio-religious dynamics significantly influence human capital development, shaping educational access, employment opportunities, and income distribution (Okorie, 2025; Nzeribe & Ezenekwe, 2022). Religious institutions often play pivotal roles in social service delivery such as education and health, yet socio-religious tensions can hinder inclusive development by exacerbating regional disparities and undermining social cohesion (Okorie, 2025; Nzeribe & Ezenekwe, 2022). Understanding and leveraging socio-religious forces for fostering human-centered development requires integrating social capital theory into policy designs to promote trust,

collaboration, and collective action for socio-economic upliftment (Nagan & Weeren, 2025).

Religion plays significant role in Nigeria as it shapes the moral frame work which enables societal solidarity. (Iheanacho & Nwagwu, 2021). As a matter of fact, discussions on economic development must include religious narratives that fine-tune economic expectations. The socio-religious implications of HCED in Nigeria are profound, affecting not only economic outcomes but also social stability and national cohesion. Ethno-religious conflicts have been shown to disrupt livelihoods, reduce investments, and impede development efforts, making peace and intercultural dialogue critical components of human-centered growth (Okorie, 2025; Nzeribe & Ezenekwe, 2022). Sustainable and inclusive economic progress in Nigeria hinges on policies that reconcile religious-diverse populations, enhance participation of marginalized groups, and address the inequalities embedded in socio-religious structures (Adesiyan, 2023; Okorie, 2025; UNCTAD, 2021; Nagan & Weeren, 2025). Thus, the socio-religious context is central to formulating a truly human-centered development agenda that promotes welfare, social justice, and equitable prosperity in Nigeria.

**Conceptual Clarification**

**Human-Centered Development**

Human-centered development means putting people first. It focuses on improving quality of life, expanding opportunities, and strengthening social bonds. Instead of measuring progress only by GDP, it looks at education, health, social participation, and moral wellbeing. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (1999) inspired much of this idea, arguing that true development expands people's ability to live meaningful lives. In Nigeria, a human-centered model challenges both leaders and citizens to ask: Who benefits from growth? Does our development respect human dignity and justice? Are communities stronger or weaker as a result? These questions link economics with ethics, showing that moral and spiritual values are essential to real progress.

**The Socio-Religious Context of Nigeria**

Nigeria is a deeply religious country. Christianity, African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Islam dominate public life, and both influence social values, governance, and community relations. Among Christians, the message of moral renewal honesty, service, love, and accountability is often preached but not always practiced in public life. This disconnect between faith and practice has weakened the moral foundation of development. Despite challenges, the church remains one of Nigeria's strongest social institutions. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and many denominations run schools, hospitals, and charities that fill gaps left by the state. For instance, Caritas Nigeria, founded by the Catholic Church, operates health programs, agricultural projects, and poverty-reduction initiatives across the country. The Redeemed Christian Church of God runs micro-enterprise programs for women and youth. These examples show how Christian institutions can advance human-centered development by focusing on people's real needs.

**Theoretical framework**

To understand how religion shapes development behavior, this paper uses Max Weber's Social Action Theory (Weber, 1930). Weber argued that people act not just for material gain, but also based on values and beliefs. He explained that, ideas especially religious ones can motivate economic behavior and shape societies. Weber's theory fits well in Nigeria's context because, faith influences how people work, lead, and relate to others. When Christian ethics inspire value-driven actions such as, honest work, compassion, and service, economic activities become moral acts. But when faith is reduced to materialism or prosperity preaching, it may encourage greed rather than service. Thus, Weber's theory helps us see that Nigeria's development problem is not only technical but also moral: changing behavior requires changing the values that guide it.

**Methodology**

This paper adopts a thematic and interpretive approach. Instead of field data collection, it draws from secondary materials recent books, journal articles, and reports (2018–2025) on religion, ethics, and development in Nigeria. The themes identified include Christian ethics, moral renewal, leadership, community development, and human welfare. The study examines how Christian teachings

influence social and economic practices, especially in education, health, and community welfare. It also looks at how religious institutions contribute to social trust and ethical reform.

The method is qualitative, relying on textual analysis and interpretation of how Christian moral principles apply to Nigeria's development challenges.

**Christian Ethics and Human Dignity**

Christian ethics begins with the belief that every person is created in the image of God and deserves respect, justice, and care. This is the heart of human-centered development. In Nigeria, however, economic systems often treat people as tools for production rather than as beings with moral worth. Christian teaching challenges this view by reminding leaders and citizens that development must serve people, not the other way around. When Jesus summarized the law as "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39), He gave a moral principle that, if practiced in society, would transform economics into an act of service. Love and compassion encourage fairness in trade, honesty in governance, and responsibility in wealth creation. Christian ethics therefore provides the moral compass for human-centered growth that respects human dignity and community wellbeing.

Examples abound. Church-run hospitals like St. Luke's Anglican Hospital in Anua, Akwa Ibom, and St. Mary's Catholic Hospital in Urua Akpan provide affordable healthcare in rural areas where government services are weak. Faith-based schools like those managed by the Anglican Church of Nigeria and the Deeper Life High School Network offer education grounded in moral values. These institutions demonstrate how Christian compassion can translate directly into social and economic progress.

**Christian Leadership and Social Responsibility**

Leadership is a moral responsibility. Yet, many Nigerians associate leadership with power and privilege rather than service. Christian ethics proposes a different model servant leadership. Jesus taught, "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43). This principle, when applied in political and economic leadership, encourages humility, accountability, and empathy.

Christian leadership is rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, emphasizing servant leadership, compassion, and care for the marginalized (Matthew 20:25-28, Luke 4:18-19).

Social responsibility is a key aspect of Christian leadership, as believers are called to love their neighbors and care for the poor and vulnerable (Matthew 25:31-46, Galatians 5:14).Christian leaders are called to serve others, prioritizing their needs above their own (Matthew 20:25-28). Christian leaders demonstrate compassion and empathy towards the marginalized and vulnerable (Luke 4:18-19).Christian leaders are stewards of God's resources, responsible for managing them wisely and justly (Matthew 25:14-30).Social Responsibility is action based, reflecting care for the Poor. leaders are to prioritize the needs of the poor and vulnerable, advocating for justice and equality (Matthew 25:31-46).

**Community Engagement:** Christian leaders engage with their communities, building relationships and promoting social cohesion (Acts 2:42-47).

**Environmental Stewardship**: Christian leaders care for God's creation, promoting sustainability and environmental justice (Genesis 2:15, Psalm 24:1).

**Jesus Christ**: The ultimate example of servant leadership and social responsibility (Matthew 20:25-28, Luke 4:18-19).

**Mother Teresa:** A model of compassion and care for the poor and marginalized.
**Martin Luther King Jr.:** A champion of social justice and human rights.

Christian leaders must prioritize social responsibility, demonstrating compassion and care for the marginalized.

Christian leaders must engage with their communities, promoting social cohesion and justice. Christian leaders must model servant leadership, prioritizing the needs of others above their own. The moral failures of many Nigerian leaders' corruption, nepotism, and misuse of public resources are at the root of underdevelopment. As Omojuwa and Olukorede (2025) notes, moral decay has weakened public trust and

damaged the nation's development capacity. Christian ethics can restore this trust by promoting integrity in leadership and stewardship in resource management. Faith-based initiatives like the Christian Leadership Institute in Abuja and Caritas Nigeria's governance programs train young leaders in ethical decision-making. These efforts show how moral education rooted in faith can shape a new generation of socially responsible citizens.

**Work, Wealth, and Stewardship**

In Christian ethics, work is not merely an economic necessity but a form of worship a way to serve God and humanity. The Apostle Paul urged believers to "work with your hands… so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders" (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12). This sense of dignity in work is central to human-centered development. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, unemployment, underemployment, and the search for quick wealth often lead people to unethical practices. Some churches have also been criticized for promoting "prosperity theology" that equates faith with material gain. When this message dominates, it undermines the spiritual value of honest work and service. Weber's Social Action Theory helps explain this. Religious ideas shape behavior, but when values shift from moral purpose to material reward, the result is social imbalance. A balanced Christian economic ethic should see wealth as a trust from God, meant to be shared for the common good. Examples of this include Christian agricultural cooperatives like the Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC), which trains rural farmers in sustainable agriculture and fair trade practices. By promoting stewardship and fairness, such initiatives embody human-centered economics.

**Faith-Based Organizations and Social Development**

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are crucial partners in Nigeria's development. They fill gaps in education, health, and poverty reduction. The Christian Health Association of Nigeria (CHAN) coordinates over 500 mission hospitals and clinics, providing care to millions in rural communities. Caritas Nigeria supports programs on HIV/AIDS prevention, food security, and civic engagement. These institutions embody the principles of love, service, and solidarity that define Christian ethics. They show that development is not just a government project it is a moral duty of the entire community. As Audu, Nassarawa, and Omolara (2024)

observes, when religious values are applied positively, they promote peace, cooperation, and responsible citizenship. However, these challenges remain. Some faith-based groups lack transparency or focus too narrowly on their members. To truly promote human-centered development, FBOs must maintain accountability and inclusivity, ensuring that their services benefit all people regardless of faith.

**Social justice, Peace, and Community Building**

Human-centered development depends on trust. Without trust, communities cannot cooperate, and policies cannot succeed. In Nigeria, decades of corruption, insecurity, and ethnic tension have eroded public confidence. Churches can help rebuild that trust by modeling honesty and compassion in their own operations and by preaching social harmony. Gbadeyan (2023) emphasizes that religious tolerance and peacebuilding are key to economic stability. When Christians and Muslims collaborate on community projects such as interfaith youth programs in Jos or community farming in Kaduna they strengthen social bonds and reduce conflict. These grassroots efforts are practical examples of religion promoting peace and shared prosperity. Christian teachings about forgiveness, reconciliation, and neighbourly love can help heal divisions. The more Nigerian communities embody these values, the stronger the moral foundation for national development becomes.Social justice, peace, and community building are intertwined concepts that are essential for creating a harmonious society. This paper explores the relationships between these concepts, highlighting the importance of addressing social injustices, promoting peace, and fostering community building. We argue that these interconnected pathways can lead to a more equitable, just, and peaceful society.

Social justice, peace, and community building are fundamental to human well-being and societal development (Galtung, 1969; Rawls, 1971). Social justice refers to the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges (Miller, 1999). Peace encompasses not only the absence of violence but also the presence of justice, equality, and harmony (Galtung, 1969). Community building involves creating and strengthening relationships, networks, and social capital (Putnam, 2000)

Social justice is a prerequisite for peace. When individuals and groups experience injustice, it can lead to conflict, violence, and social unrest (Galtung, 1969). Addressing social injustices, such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination, is essential for promoting peace (Sen, 2009). As Lederach (1997) notes, peacebuilding involves transforming relationships and structures to promote justice, equality, and human rights.Community building is critical for promoting social justice. Strong communities can mobilize resources, support marginalized groups, and advocate for policy changes (Putnam, 2000). Community-based initiatives, such as community organizing and participatory budgeting, can empower marginalized communities and promote social justice (Gret & Sintomer, 2005).

Peace and community building are interdependent. Peaceful communities are more likely to foster strong social relationships, trust, and cooperation (Galtung, 1969). Community building initiatives, such as dialogue groups and restorative justice programs, can promote peace by addressing conflicts and building relationships (Lederach, 1997).

Social justice, peace, and community building are interconnected pathways to a harmonious society. Addressing social injustices, promoting peace, and fostering community building are essential for creating a more equitable, just, and peaceful world.

**The Challenges of Moral and Spiritual Decline**

Despite the positive role of Christian ethics, the reality is that religion in Nigeria is sometimes commercialized or manipulated for personal gain. Prosperity preaching, exploitation of followers, and lack of transparency among some church leaders have weakened the credibility of religious institutions. As Chidi Emeaku (2023) notes, moral integrity is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). When religious leaders fail to model integrity, they lose their power to influence society positively. Similarly, Edigbo and Nwube (2023) argue that African traditional communal values like shared responsibility and empathy should complement Christian ethics to rebuild moral consciousness. Nigeria's problem, therefore, is not the absence of religion but the absence of religious

morality in practice. True faith must move beyond words to action, guiding both personal behavior and public policy.

The rapid pace of human-centred development has led to significant moral and spiritual decline in many societies. Some of the key challenges include:
Increased focus on materialism and consumption, leading to a sense of emptiness and disconnection. As Bauman (2007) argues, the pursuit of happiness through consumption has become a defining feature of modern life, often at the expense of deeper human connections and a sense of purpose.

Disregard for traditional values and cultural heritage, resulting in loss of community and social cohesion. Giddens (1991) notes that modernity's emphasis on individualism and progress can lead to a disembedding of social relationships and a loss of traditional authority structures.Environmental degradation and exploitation, reflecting a lack of spiritual connection with nature. Naess (1989) advocates for a deeper sense of ecological consciousness, recognizing the intrinsic value of non-human life and the interconnectedness of all living beings. Growing inequality and social injustice, highlighting the need for a more equitable and compassionate approach to development (Sen, 2009). The erosion of empathy and emotional intelligence, as technological advancements and urbanization reduce face-to-face interactions and deepen social isolation (Turkle, 2011).

**Toward an Ethically Grounded Development Vision**

Human-centered development calls for a reawakening of moral and spiritual consciousness. This does not mean replacing government policies with sermons, but rather integrating ethical reflection into public life. Policies must be measured not only by economic success but also by how they affect human dignity, justice, and inclusion. The Church can contribute by promoting ethical education, mentoring youth, supporting transparent governance, and encouraging responsible citizenship. Seminaries and Christian universities in Nigeria, such as Babcock University, Veritas University, and Redeemer's University, are already incorporating leadership and ethics courses that prepare students to serve with integrity. Through such efforts, Christian ethics can inspire a new national

narrative one where development is not only about wealth but about human value, fairness, and shared responsibility.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined how Christian ethics can guide Nigeria's human-centered economic development. Using Weber's Social Action Theory, it has shown that beliefs and moral values deeply influence social behavior and economic outcomes. In a country where corruption, inequality, and weak institutions have slowed progress, a return to moral and spiritual principles is vital. Christian ethics that is rooted in love, justice, stewardship, and service, offers a strong foundation for rebuilding trust and promoting inclusive growth. Churches and faith-based organizations already play key roles in education, healthcare, and community support. If these moral principles are also applied in governance and economic policy, Nigeria's development can become more equitable, sustainable, and truly people-centered. Ultimately, development without moral direction is shallow. The moral and spiritual renewal of Nigeria's leaders and citizens must accompany every reform effort. It is only when integrity, compassion, and justice guide national life that development can truly serve humanity.

**Recommendations**

Guided by the principles of Christian ethics the following recommendations are offered.

**1. Integrate Christian Ethics into National Development Planning**

Government policies should deliberately incorporate moral education and ethics training to foster a culture rooted in integrity and responsibility. Engaging churches and Christian universities as partners in civic education can equip citizens with a strong sense of duty and ethical reflection, strengthening societal values essential for sustainable national progress.

**2. Support Faith-Based Social Services**

Government agencies should seek to collaborate with faith-based organizations to enhance the reach and effectiveness of social services like healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation. By providing incentives for transparent and accountable

service delivery, the government can ensure that these partnerships deliver high-quality benefits consistently, building trust and improving social welfare.

**3. Promote Ethical Leadership Training**

Programs akin to Caritas Nigeria's governance workshops should be expanded to cultivate young leaders who prioritize accountability, humility, and servant leadership principles. The Church's role in emphasizing service over status encourages leaders to focus on the common good rather than personal gain, fostering governance that respects citizens and promotes justice.

**4. Encourage Economic Stewardship and Fairness**

Religious institutions have a crucial role in teaching a balanced theology that values honest labour, ethical wealth acquisition, and responsible sharing. Churches can actively promote cooperative ventures and microfinance initiatives designed to empower disadvantaged populations, helping to reduce poverty and promote fairness in the economic system.

**5. Foster Interfaith Collaboration for Peace and Development**

Christian and Muslim communities should unite on joint social projects as a practical pathway to peacebuilding. This collaboration reduces mistrust, promotes mutual respect, and creates shared opportunities for development, which strengthens social cohesion and stability necessary for national growth.

**6. Rebuild Social Trust through Accountability**

Churches must lead by example in maintaining transparency, especially in financial management and community engagement. By upholding the highest standards of integrity and openness, they regain moral authority and inspire confidence in both religious institutions and public governance.

**7. Promote Community-Based Human Development**

Faith organizations should prioritize grassroots empowerment through locally-focused training, education, and healthcare initiatives. Empowering communities from the ground up ensures development is inclusive and relevant to local needs, creating a foundation for sustainable and people-centered national progress.

If Christian ethics can inspire both personal virtue and public morality, and if churches fully embrace their roles as agents of justice and compassionate service, Nigeria can advance toward genuine human-centered development one that recognizes every individual's dignity and fosters thriving communities.

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