Impact of cultural practices to Liberia developmental agenda

Guggie A. N. Tamba

Abstract:

Liberia is one of the poorest countries in the world today located in West Africa. Having been colonized by the United States, the country has a close relation with America. The two main ethnic divisions in the nation include the American minority and the indigenous majority. The indigenous majority comprises of 17 ethnic groups that practice various cultural practices and beliefs. Some of the cultural practices such as Female Genital Mutilation, land ownership, and traditional justice could hinder the achievement of Liberia developmental agenda, as discussed in this paper. However, cultural observations such as the leadership, farming, and co-existence cultures in Liberia support economic progress, which will be discussed in-depth in this paper. Importantly, this paper proposes some policy recommendations for economic growth in Liberia. Also, the paper discusses some of the challenges faced such as the high inflation rate, poor infrastructure, lack of governance, and limited resources, to mention a few, that could impede the implementation of the economic reforms.

Keywords: **Cultural Practices, Economic Progress, Developmental Agenda**

Introduction:

Cultural practices could have some positive and negative effects on the development agenda of a country. Culture refers to a very important element of any nation as it determines, to a large extent, the way people behave and go about their day-to-day live. Similarly, Aigrain and Aigrain (2012) defined culture as the extent of enlightenment on factors deemed as excellence in fields such as art, behavior, and the sum of the various way of life built by a group of people and transmitted to generations. Importantly, culture is one of the developmental pillars of a country. People with the same culture share similar goals, references, attitudes, and knowledge attributed to a particular group and has a positive influence on the social progress of a nation. The culture of a country could affect its development progress positively or negatively. According to Aigrain and Aigrain (2012), cultural influences policymaking. Some policies could create societal progress, while others could disguise other development forces at work. For instance, cultural beliefs on achievement and success could create positive economic development, while attitudes on post-materialism could adversely affect the development progress of a nation. Therefore, this paper seeks to expose the various cultural practices among the tribes in Liberia, their effects on social development and various ways which can be utilized to curb these practices for Liberia developmental purposes.

Key Issues:

Liberia is located on the West Coast of Africa that was colonized by the United States in the nineteenth century. Liberia consists of 17 different ethnic groups that have created divisions in the beliefs and common agenda of the country (Micallef, 2011). However, the entire society is divided into two groups, the minority (literate), and the indigenous majority (mostly illiterate). The minority group consists mainly of the settlers from America in Liberia. One of the reasons for selecting this topic is to aid the study on the impact of culture practices on Liberia's developmental agenda. The majority groups in the nation have various cultural beliefs of male dominance, which affects the overall development of a country among other cultural attitudes.

The gender gap is one of the main issues embedded in the cultural practices of the Liberians. Some traditional beliefs and culture of Liberians continue to deny women of their right to education and formal employment. Importantly, the communities also believe that the role of a woman is primarily to give birth and home management. Besides, once a female reaches the puberty age, they are married off to men whose role is to provide for their families. With this in mind, women give birth at a very early age since society expects them to give birth immediately after marriage. Therefore, early motherhood is one of the cultural issues in Liberian communities. In addition to that, Liberian men are always busy providing for their families. Women end up becoming the single-head of their homes. The women must take care of their children and are tasked with the mandate of raising the young ones and instilling good behavior in them as well (Micallef, 2011). After women get married, school is primarily not an option for

them. The huge tasks that await them after marriage act as education barriers. Thus, women are deprived of god education, unlike their male counterparts.

Further, some communities still practice female genital mutilation (FGM) up-to-date. The practices have significant health consequences for women. Primarily, FGM practices coupled up with the issue of inadequate reproductive health facilities and/or education cause substantial health issues among women. The FGM practices aim at lowering the sexual interest of the females enabling them to maintain their virginity. Therefore, it is articulate that culture in Liberia has increasingly created the belief of male dominance. Women are usually denied the right to education and formal employment. According to Solà-Martín (2011), the country faces increased cases of early pregnancies, causing young females to drop out of school to take care of their families. With this in mind, it is articulate that the country has unequal access to educational opportunities.

Contrary to that, Liberia has some positive cultural practices. Farming in the country has been a common practice before colonization and continues to be a source of income for most people up-to-date. The country practices farming of a variety of commodities that is significant for the livelihood of families and largely country's economy. Further, Liberia is a collective culture where people work together and agree to be led by others regardless of their culture and tradition. Collectiveness among citizens is the source of unity. Where one person from one tribe can work with others and lead other people without any cause of disunity, a country is likely to succeed. In such a case, the basis for selecting a leader would be their innate capabilities and skills other than tribal basis.

Situational Analysis:

A variety of cultural practices in Liberia hinder economic growth while others support the country's development agenda. As mentioned in the sections above, culture could be both harmful and beneficial to the development progress of a nation. Therefore, this section seeks to analyze the cultural situation in Liberia and assess its influence on the country's growth and development.

Cultural Practices That Hinder Economic Growth:

First, about half of the 17 ethnic groups in Liberia practice Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) up-to-date. As Ross, Strimling, Ericksen, Lindenfors, and Mulder (2016) indicated, FGM is a term that refers to the surgical removal of the most sensitive sections of the female genital parts. It is a practice that has been primarily surpassed by time considering its harmful effects on society. However, some communities, such as those in Liberia, still practice it since it is customary. Importantly, FGM is an essential rite of passage for societies that always practice it as it marks the transition of a female child from childhood to womanhood. The common belief, as Ross et al. (2016) indicated, is that FGM practices help to ensure that a girl's sexuality remains controlled hence helps to ensure that the virginity of a woman remains preserved before and after marriage.

In Liberia, the Sande society is commonly involved in FGM practices that affect the right of a girl to education. According to Ross et al. (2016), the young girls in Liberia from the Sande community are taken out of school while others are abducted for initiation purposes. The practices make the young females remain in the grove for a variety of months. After the initiation

practices, the majority of the women are forced into early marriages. Others are likely to suffer severe complications due to the FGM practices that could inhibit them from returning to school.

Importantly, FGM is not only a burden to women in Liberia but also burdens the economy of the nation. Victims of FGM, primarily, need exclusive and additional health care that aims at dealing with complications resulting from the cultural practices. The extra health care is an added burden to the health service system of the nation. Some of the harmful effects of FGM practices on health include infertility, infections on the genital areas, and even death. As Wagner (2015) asserted, women and girls are an essential part of the economy, particularly in the labor and traditional agro-industry that is prevalent in Liberia. Asides from that, most of the FGM victims experience long-term side effects such as chronic infections and pain that inhibits them from actively participating in the workforce of the country's economy. In this section, it is clear that the side effects of FGM and deterioration of health impede economic development in Liberia. In most cases, when women cannot participate fully in the workforce due to the substantial effects of FGM, the economy of a country is hurt intensely.

Secondly, Sassywood in Liberia is mostly known for its role/use in the criminal justice system; especially in the rural areas. When someone is accused of whatsoever crime, he is made to drink the liquid from the bark of the sassywood tree; if the accused is injured or dies as a result of the ordeal, then he is deemed guilty; however, if he/she does not suffer any injury or if the wound heals quickly then he is pronounced innocent. The formal justice system of Liberia is inaccessible to most people, especially those in the rural areas. With the accessibility of Sassywood justice, a form of traditional justice, in Liberia, people from rural areas can access the justice system. A conventional justice system is a form of justice provided to most Liberians, particularly the poor residing in rural areas. As Joireman and Meitzner Yoder (2016) indicated, traditional justice mechanisms of Liberia ought to be analyzed intensively to prevent the entrenchment of the dual justice system in the country. The Sassywood justice system is meant

for the impoverished and formal one for the urban people. The presence of the traditional justice system in rural areas does not guarantee equal access. The existence of two justice systems in the country has polarized the citizens. Over the years, the continued use of traditional justice systems has sowed seeds of discord that would eventually result in violence if they are not addressed. Importantly, conventional justice systems have the capability of shuttering the development agenda of the country. One example includes the fact that traditional justice system promotes inequality between the impoverished people and those residing in urban regions. With the existing disparities, discord between the people increases disunity and development is not likely to strive in such an environment. The country is expected to experience different forms of oppositions to any development strategies, particularly from marginalized individuals.

Thirdly, land ownership is common in Liberia and often violates the rights of the inhabitants of the communities particularly women on land ownership. Kalliongis (2017) provided a real-life example where one woman in Gbarma region of Liberia used to make Eight thousand Liberian dollars (**L$8,000.00**) from her farm produce. However, her earnings were cut short after she saw a survey team on her land, and others were working on the property. The government had given the team a concession to allow them to set up a mining plant on the woman's customary land. It is worth noting that the woman was not involved in the decision-making processes. More so, she was not informed of the concession issued to the people setting a mining plant on her property in Gbarma. The company in charge of the mining operations set up a dam on the property, leaving the woman with no means of making a living to sustain her life and that of her family. In addition to that, the firm used different chemicals that affected the air in the community while the water used by other community members became poisoned. No relocation benefits were provided to the woman who farmed on the land and to the surrounding community for the damages caused by the mining plant. Importantly, this is just one example of land ownership with concessions often issued by the government.

Consequently, the farming of Sime Darby, a large-scale industrial oil palm plantation located in the South-western location in Bomi, Liberia, has facilitated violent security unrest and violated human land rights among the landowners in the country. Women who farm on lands are primarily the victims since they do not participate in any decision-making processes (Kea, 2010). Most people are left impoverished, which increases the poverty gap in the country and stunts the economic growth of the entire state as well.

Cultural Practices that Support Economic Growth:

The kuu is an informal, self-organized, social organization that farms cooperatively on the lands of the various members and their families, and in some cases, sells their collective labor to farmers outside the group. Members participate in all stages of agricultural production from preparing the land to planting and harvest. Both male and female youth participate in the kuu system equally and operations are similar, though male kuu groups take on work, which is considered more physically demanding or dangerous such as clearing the brush, felling trees and fencing land. Females may face specific challenges within the kuu during pregnancy with kuu in different villages dealing with this situation in different ways – at times reducing their workloads and in others, refusing their participation in the labor as well as benefits of the group. According to Muin (2016), the ethnic groups in Liberia are known for their collective artwork. Unlike other countries with different tribal groups, Liberia is unique in that most tribes allow for co-existence. Almost all tribes in the country have sayings promoting collectiveness in all their duties. Collective beliefs and ideals are critical since they enable equal opportunities for all regardless of their tribe.

Also, Muin (2016) indicated that a cooperative society tends to be more stable than individualistic communities. During these times, Liberian consider themselves as one hence explaining the reason why one can say that Liberia has two broader ethnic or cultural groups that are the American minority and the indigenous majority. The collective nature of the tribal groups in Liberia does not pose a threat to the nation's development agenda. Instead, they have a role to play in making development easy within the country. Mainly, this means that people in Liberia get formal employment based on their qualification rather than the tribal groups within which they belong. In addition to that, development is likely to thrive in areas with limited ethnic conflicts.

Secondly, Liberians are known for their agricultural practices that have been their traditional practice and continued to be a routine in modern Liberia. Rice is a staple food in the country, asides from farming rice, Liberians practice agricultural activities such as planting onions, mangos, plantains, pepper, and cassava. Although most Liberians have no school knowledge of farming, they practice traditional farming methods that have helped in allowing them to earn a living (Muin, 2016). Agriculture is essential in fostering economic growth and development agenda of a country. If the government taps the farming practices of the Liberians desirably, the country is likely to practice large-scale farming for use internally and export purposes as well. Also, the government of Liberia is the single-largest employer in the nation. If it encourages farming practices, agricultural farms could employ to most of the citizens hence improving the overall economic growth of the country.

Thirdly, Liberia, unlike other African states, is known for the right cadre of leaders that aim at fostering the definite improvement of the Liberians (Zonen, 2019). In the past, the country has

chiefs who acted as social leaders and helped drive the communities in the right direction (Muin, 2016). The leadership style practiced in the past is still prevalent among the population. It is worth noting that good leadership can create a culture of value and significance that is likely to attract the attention of other people, particularly investors in the world today. Asides from that, the Liberians are ready to be led and to follow the footsteps laid out for them. Mainly, this serves as an advantage since the government could tap it to create a prosperous country that obliges by the set standards. A peaceful and leadership-driven nation has the capability of attracting people willing to invest, which will eventually increase its overall economic growth.

Policies Recommendations for Liberia's Development:

For Liberia to succeed in its development agenda, the government must come up with policies aimed at dealing with the harmful cultural practices that hinder economic prosperity. The policy recommendations are as follows:

- The Liberian government should set limitations to cultural practices such as FGM, early marriages and land ownership rights with the intent of safeguarding the economy of the country (Bøås, 2009).

- The government ought to set legal measures that ensure that all citizens regardless of their gender can access education and other fundamental rights in the country are realized and enjoyed by every person.

. Liberia should strengthen its governance and rule of law by building professional and better paid civil service personnel and introducing systems aimed at guarding the nation against forms of corruption.

.   The government should strengthen the parliament and judiciary to ensure that they

shun harmful customary lawful practices and encourage the use of statutory

law that will ensure gender equality among the citizens.

.   The country should review its foundation for democracy and towards strengthening

the civil society, media and judiciary since it will enable the country to

achieve its development agenda (Bøås & Utas, 2014).

Challenges for Implementing Reforms:

Liberia faces immense challenges that could hinder the effective implementation of reforms.

First, Liberia faces different health issues. According to Solà-Martín (2011), about 10% of the

school-attending students in the country have poor vision. The poor vision affects the ability of

the children to remain in school and gain the desired education, which is essential for the

nation's achievement of its development agendas. Considering that 40% of the population in

Liberia is below 15 years, an effective school health program could be essential (Solà-Martín,

2011). Therefore, health issues among the children are a critical factor likely to impede the

implementation of economic progress reforms.

Additionally, Liberia has poor infrastructure, lack of human resources, lack of a governance

structure, and lack of funding for services, which could also interfere with the implementation

reforms. The lack of a governance structure could impede effective decision-making within the

country, especially in economic issues. Most of these challenges could hinder investors from

investing in the country and prevent the implementation of both health and education programs.

Other economic problems that could impede the implementation of reforms include high

inflation considering that it reached 28.5% by the end of the year 2018 ('Overview: The World

Bank in Liberia', 2019). Factors such as significant depreciation of the country's dollar against the US dollar fuel the high rate of inflation. The high costs of living due to the inflation rate of the country, coupled with the high unemployment rate, undermine the welfare and financial progress of the people of Liberia.

Conclusion:

In summation, Liberia is a country in the west of Africa consisting of 17 ethnic groups. The many tribal groups in the country have different cultural practices that hinder while others support the development agenda of the country. Some cultural practices hindering economic progress include Female Genital Mutilation, land ownership with concessionaries, and traditional justice. FGM inhibits economic growth with the increased health burden created on the health care system of the country with the rise of the many harmful health effects of FGM such as infections. Land ownership with concessionaries hinders development in Liberia since owning land is restricted to men hence preventing women from economic stability, therefore, increasing the poverty gap in the nation. Lastly, traditional justice promotes inequality between those residing in the rural areas and those in the urban regions, thus stunting the economic growth of the country. On the other hand, cultural practices such as leadership, co-existence, and farming activities support economic development in Liberia. The country has a leadership culture that allows the best person to be in a leadership position to guide the communities effectively. Farming is a common cultural practice in the country and helps in supporting economic growth by improving the overall financial growth of the people. I believe that the country has a collective culture that allows teamwork among communities, which would support economic

growth by enabling people to work together to achieve a common objective. Having outlines the

above, I propose a variety of policy recommendations such as strengthening the governance and

the rule of law in Liberia. Lastly, I also discuss some challenges that could impede the

implementation of the policy reforms that include health issues, poor governance structures, and

lack   of   resources.

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