



Analysis of the Theoretical Foundations of The Use Your Talents Approach in Contributing to The Development of African Churches

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- Received Date: 17 Nov 2025
- Accepted Date: 30 Nov 2025
- Publication Date: 06 Dec 2025

Keywords

Use Your Talents, Top-down, bottom-up, local and community-based approach to development, paradigm shift, Lutheran Churches in Africa, and missionary work

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Abstract

This article analyzes the theoretical foundations of the Use Your Talents (UYT) approach in contributing to the development of Lutheran churches in Africa. Indeed, this approach originated within the framework of the implementation of an organizational development project within the Lutheran Church of Madagascar, funded by the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS). This experimental project emerged in a context of crisis in diaconal service and the failure of the top-down approach in the missionary approach to development in these churches. Following the footsteps of the indigenous methodology, which is inspired by collaborative approaches to decolonizing research in indigenous settings (Smith, 1999; Drawing on Kovach (2009) and documentary analysis, this article enriches the epistemology of social sciences, indigenous knowledge, and development studies by establishing elective affinities between the Use Your Talents (UYT) approach and decolonial theory. The Use Your Talents concept, as operationalized in the Lutheran Churches of Madagascar, Ethiopia, and Cameroon, contributes to a paradigm shift in the missionary approach to development within African Lutheran Churches and a local, community-based approach to economic development.

Introduction

Faced with the disenchantment with the Missionary approach to Development of the Lutheran Churches in Africa, the search for an alternative development model, understood as "a forced modernization of forms of production"; this process has been underway for several decades. The aim was to emerge from the "long night," the underdevelopment of African societies or nations so that they may access the "light" It is within the context of criticism of the traditional approach to development that reflections emerge aimed at exploring other avenues for development. The Use Your Talents (UYT) concept, in its operationalization, is establishing itself as a development approach for Lutheran churches in Africa.

From a scientific perspective, diaconal service, which incorporates the Use Your Talents approach, has been the subject of a considerable body of research. It has been primarily considered from three different analytical perspectives. The first, inspired by theological approaches, views diaconal service as an instrument of evangelization [1-8]. The second, influenced by developmental approaches, analyzes diaconal service as an instrument for promoting holistic mission.

Holistic mission combines the proclamation of the Gospel with other dimensions, such as diaconal service, the preservation of creation, advocacy, development, and others. [7,9-12]. The third examines the crisis of diaconal ministry or its difficult appropriation in African or Malagasy contexts, referring to the difficulties experienced by churches stemming from missionary work in managing and prospering [7,13,14].

However, an objective examination of the above reveals that analyses of diakonia and development are often based on questionable theoretical frameworks. First, the theological perspective that understands diakonia as any selfless service rendered to one's neighbor in accordance with biblical precepts, or that rejects its instrumental dimension, is idealistic. Beyond the theological debates surrounding diaconal ministry today, it is clearly established that diaconal ministry is part of the holistic mission. Furthermore, viewing diaconal ministry as an instrument for promoting development seems heretical. Analyzing practices presents difficulty in distinguishing between diaconal ministry as an act of faith and diaconal ministry as an instrument of proselytism. Finally, analyses of the crisis of diaconal ministry in the African context are pessimistic. What matters here is neither the failure nor the success of

Citation: Assana. Analysis of the Theoretical Foundations of The Use Your Talents Approach in Contributing to The Development of African Churches. Japan J Res. 2026;7(1):167.

diaconal ministry in African churches, but rather the analysis of the epistemological status of the Use Your Talents approach as a diaconal approach to development in African churches. African churches, particularly those stemming from missionary work (Catholic and Protestant), many of which were established from the second half of the 19th century onward, are involved in development initiatives. The objective is to study the theoretical foundations of the Use Your Talents approach in its contribution to economic development for Churches in Africa .

The Use Your Talents approach was not developed through explicit theoretical reflection; it emerged from social practices. This approach was highlighted in the Malagasy context during the implementation of an organizational development project. It is an initiative born from the pursuit and achievement of development actions by members of congregations and parishes of the Lutheran Church of Madagascar. [15]. Groups within these ecclesiastical entities afore mentioned, faced with the difficulties or development challenges confronting the populations constituting the said entities on the one hand, and the surrounding populations on the other, have mobilized, forming development committees represented at all levels of the ecclesiastical organizational structure. It is worth mentioning that the emergence of the Use Your Talents approach is part of the action research accompanying development projects. .

The choice of the Use Your Talents approach is symbolic. It is part of an alternative and complementary approach to development [16]. Based on the Malagasy case study, the churches intend to renew their development strategies through the Use Your Talents approach. Despite the widespread view that relegates religion to the ranks of reactionary forces in Africa [17], religious actors have always been agents of socio-political change [18,19]. Thus, since the 1970s, Lutheran Churches in Africa that are members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), following the example of the Mekane Yesus Evangelical Church of Ethiopia, have been calling for a holistic conception of their mission as a Church (Hoffman, 2009). Development, synonymous with diakonia, is a component of the Church's mission that contributes, from a holistic perspective, to the promotion of the human person created in the image of God according to Scripture [20,12].

This article poses the problem of the epistemological (scientific) status of the Use Your Talents approach, that is to say the verification of strict or relative conformity with a model forming a set of norms, values and criteria which define scientificity, as well as the general conditions which a discipline or an approach should fulfill, in order to reach the level of objective and positive sciences [21].

The central question then is: what are the theoretical foundations of the Use Your Talents approach? Our hypothesis is as follows: the Use Your Talents approach is a scientific approach that contributes to the local application of decolonial theory and Indigenous research methodology. The Indigenous research methodology was adopted for this research because it draws on collaborative approaches to decolonizing research in Indigenous communities [22,23]. Data collection relied on documentary sources and direct observation.

The analysis of the collected data led to two main points. The first examines Use Your Talents as a critique of the missionary approach to the development of African Lutheran Churches (1). The second apprehends it as a paradigm shift in the approach to the development of Lutheran Churches in Africa (2).

Use Your Talents: A Critique of the Missionary Approach to Development in Lutheran Churches of Africa

The traditional approach of missionaries (Norwegian and American) to the development of African churches is complex, and its components evolve over time. The needs-based approach to development was, until recently, a benchmark for development actors in most African countries in the post-independent era [12]. It underpinned the technical cooperation policies established between postcolonial states and colonial powers. However, this approach generally failed to trigger the development of the works inherited from the founding missions. To better understand the traditional missionary approach to the development of African churches, it is important to examine its theoretical foundations (A) before its unintended negative consequences (B).

Theoretical Foundations

The missionary approach to development in African Lutheran Churches is underpinned on the one hand by Official Development Assistance (ODA) (1) and on the other hand by the top-down approach (2).

Public Development Assistance

The concept of Official Development Assistance (ODA) aimed to promote economic growth in developing countries [24]. Several forms of ODA exist. Depending on the number of partners involved, a distinction is made between multilateral and bilateral aid. Multilateral aid is provided by a group of states or, more generally, by an international organization [24]. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon is the result of multilateral aid between two states: the American Mission (the Sudan Mission) and the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS). Bilateral aid, on the other hand, is granted by one state to another. This type of aid may or may not be conditional. Bilateral aid is classified as tied or untied. It is untied when the donor does not impose any conditions on the recipient regarding purchases or services in return. This is why it is also referred to as disinterested aid. Bilateral aid is considered tied if the donor country makes the granting of aid conditional. Regardless of the type of aid, it can take the following forms: technical assistance, support program/budget support, or support in food aid (Ibid).

Technical assistance takes the form of autonomous cooperation, autonomous technical cooperation, and technical cooperation linked to investment projects. Autonomous technical cooperation involves the provision of resources aimed at ensuring the transfer of skills, technical and administrative knowledge, or technology to strengthen national capacity and expand development activities, without these resources being tied to the implementation of an investment project. Investment projects, on the other hand, involve the financing, in cash and in kind, of specific equipment or investment projects. Technical cooperation linked to investment projects is also referred to as financial assistance (Ibid).

Since the establishment of Lutheran churches in Africa (Madagascar, Cameroon, Ethiopia, etc.) in the 1960s, they have maintained close ties with Western partners, namely Lutheran missionaries from the United States and Norway. Throughout their history, multifaceted cooperation (technical assistance, support program, etc.) with these Western partners has strengthened over the years. The contribution of these two partners to the development of these churches has been enormous. Numerous projects have been undertaken to promote

their growth. Consequently, the presence of missions in the field was contingent upon the deployment of personnel (Norwegian and American) [25].

Analyzing the criteria for granting international aid reveals three main logics for international aid allocation: a needs-based logic, where the very objective of development aid determines the extent of the needs of recipient countries or populations, thus defining the level of aid to be granted. ; a logic of interest/or proximity. Unlike a logic of need, here we have a logic of supply determined by the characteristics of the giver and no longer of the receiver and a logic of efficiency or merit: here, aid goes to countries where it can be better managed and more effective in terms of results. The notion of efficiency refers to the political, economic, and/or institutional environment of the country in question. In particular, aid goes to the best projects and to countries with the best profile: political and economic stability, good governance, and effective international cooperation. Aid goes to countries that meet a number of conditions necessary for its effectiveness. Depending on the period, these three logics (interest, need, and efficiency) have coexisted in practice or in intention. But they have also evolved with the transformation of the international situation (at the political and economic levels) and the challenges of North/South relations [24].

If we look for economic theory for justifications for missionary aid to develop churches in Africa, we are led to consider economic theories of justice [26-30]. However, the criteria for justice are all problematic and lead to questionable redistribution policies. Economists prefer to sidestep the issue by invoking the altruism of the wealthiest and the improvement of everyone's well-being. Aid would then be a policy to generate improvements in the Pareto sense. From an efficiency perspective, if we look for economic theory for justifications for international aid, we are led to consider the existence of global public goods (peace, the environment, health), certain planetary challenges (poverty, migration), and interstate externalities. In this case, international aid is the policy to be pursued to improve the well-being of all. It is therefore an optimal, and thus efficient, Pareto policy (Ibid: 15). The traditional approach of missionaries to the development of African Lutheran churches was also underpinned by a top-down approach.

The top-down approach

The top-down approach emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This approach studies implementation from the perspective of those who design or develop policies [31]. Implementation is considered a distinct phase from policy design and formulation [32]. It can be viewed as a hierarchical process involving the application of decisions emanating from a central authority: "The policy designer centrally determines how the implementation will be carried out by 'implementers'" [33]. Indeed, the terms top-down and bottom-up are frequently used in organizational and management theories, as well as in work on change management. They primarily concern the type of relationship between managers and employees, and more specifically the degree or methods of employee involvement in operational or strategic decisions. Thus, the top-down approach is considered a form of directive management, while the bottom-up approach is seen as more participatory. Numerous categories have been proposed to distinguish themselves from a top-down approach, in which the "top" (decision-makers, an elite...considered the key players) decides and the "bottom" simply implements. .

However, this rationale, top-down approach has been the

subject of much criticism [34-36]. The central point of these criticisms is that prioritizing the perspective of decision-makers leads to neglecting other actors, the implementers who interpret, facilitate, modify, or thwart policy. Indeed, the prescribed standards are often seen as disrespectful of the diverse realities and numerous challenges present on the ground [35,37,38]. To paraphrase Madaule [39], missionary societies often tend to reproduce an external, off-the-shelf model, failing to adequately consider the diversity of the local context. According to this author, "developed" countries still impose their value system today, framing their projects within a short-term vision and attempting to develop, or even impose, a model applicable to all. According to Lavagnon [40], too much energy and time are devoted by aid agencies to accountability and performance evaluation of projects, to the detriment of the organizational decision-making process, the socio-political context, and local culture.

Studies on the success of international development projects converge on elements that can be grouped under four perspectives: stakeholder involvement throughout the project lifecycle, achievement of results, project impact, project team skills, and the implementation and management of projects within the community [41]. According to Aatonen et al. [42], Jepsen and Eskerod [43], and Lim and Zain [44], a project's success depends on how well stakeholders' needs are met. The importance of stakeholders in project management is such that a project can be seen as a temporary coalition of stakeholders working together to create something [43]. Khang and Moe [45] also emphasize the dynamic relationships and the role played by stakeholders. Cleland and Gareis [46], as well as Muriithi and Crawford [47], attribute the failure of international projects to a lack of internal capacity and the difficulty beneficiaries have in coordinating the rapid pace of change brought about by the projects, whose principles are not always aligned with local cultures and traditions (Ibid). Ramaprasad and Prakash [48] argue that many international development projects will fail due to the "top-down" perspective of the donor, which often excludes local knowledge from project implementation. They consider it important to include this knowledge to achieve what they call Emergent Project Management. However, the missionary approach to Church Development in Africa has had the unintended consequence of creating a crisis in diaconal ministry.

The crisis of diaconal ministry as a perverse effect

At the heart of the sociology developed by Boudon lies the notion of perverse effects, which he considers "one of the fundamental causes of social imbalances and social change" [49], and which he defines as undesirable emerging effects. The crisis of diaconal ministry in African or Malagasy contexts, as a perverse effect of the missionary approach to development, refers to the difficulties faced by churches stemming from missionary work in prospering [7,13,14]. Mission societies, in their conquest of non-Western societies, had favored institutional diaconal ministry for strategic reasons. Diakonia is an integral part of the Church's mission. The origins of the diaconal crisis lie in the transition of leadership, when missionary personnel hand over the reins to local staff in managing diaconal works [13,50]. The diaconal crisis is caused by a "wait-and-see" attitude (1) and the growth of neo-patrimonialism and corruption (2).

The "wait-and-see" attitude

The crisis of diaconal ministry in the African context stems from a "wait-and-see" attitude. The irregularity of state funding

for these denominational diaconal works has been compounded by a process of disengagement from traditional partners, the funders of operating and investment funds. The case of the diaconal works of the Evangelical Lutheran Church is quite illustrative [51]. In the case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon (EELC), a “wait-and-see” attitude prevails, reflecting a dependency syndrome. Strategies are developed to maintain aid from external partners, in a context of declining “traditional” missionary presence. This is how attempts are being made to postpone the replacement of missionary staff. The case of the education secretariat is a prime example. When the Norwegian Mission Society wanted to withdraw its education staff, the EELC authorities took numerous steps to prevent it. The official argument put forward was that this missionary staff was still capable of securing funding for the schools. Their departure would lead to the collapse of the organization. Ultimately, the missionary staff was withdrawn [7]. Significant financial support measures provided by the Norwegian Mission Society in connection with this staff replacement decision failed to provide a lasting solution to the schools' funding problem. Some schools have been put on hold. At the beginning of the 1990s, this diaconal work included about fifty primary schools scattered almost across the entire extent of what were mission fields, of the Norwegian Mission Society and the Sudan Mission respectively.

By the end of the 1990s, only about thirty primary schools remained [50,51]. The number reportedly declined further by the end of the following decade. The opportunity created by the increased demand for educational facilities in the city of Ngaoundéré since the year 2000 has been seized by other private developers, both religious and secular [7]. The EELC (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon) and its Education Secretariat have not. Its portfolio of educational institutions, inherited from the Missions, has declined in number and even quality. The EELC inherited the missions of several institutions, including schools and the Protestant College of Ngaoundéré, which educated generations of elites. We observe that these schools are closing down or are no longer able to compete with projects that enrich them thereby living the schools and their teachers impoverished [9]. We can also cite the development projects that succeeded one another before disappearing: the Rural Development Project (RDP) gave way to the Integrated Development Support Project (IDSP) after going bankrupt, and Integrated Development Support Project closed down after also going bankrupt (Ibid). Besides a wait-and-see attitude, the crisis in diaconal care can be explained by neo-patrimonialism and corruption.

The development of neo-patrimonialism and corruption

The analysis of neo-patrimonialism precedes corruption. This neo-patrimonial regime can be defined as the absence of any differentiation between the political sphere and other aspects of society, such as the kinship system [52-54]. Neo-patrimonial practices are clearly seen in church administration, with the appointment of relatives of political leaders to high-ranking church positions. More than coercion, co-optation constitutes the means of maintaining what Linda Beck calls “patrimonial democracy or clientelist democracy” [55]. On closer inspection, clientelism and neo-patrimonialism contribute to the personalization of power which relies on the exclusion of political figures capable of competing with ecclesiastical leaders [56].

Despite the formalization of criteria for the administration of

religious denominations, the private appropriation of religious property generally follows the path of ethnic kinship for purposes of redistribution, patronage, and nepotism [57]. At the Lutheran Fraternal Church of Cameroon (EFLC), this neo-patrimonialism is manifested by the concentration of power in the hands of members of President Mousgoum Goyek Daga Robert's family during the period from 1991 to 2018. The position of Director of Development for this religious denomination is held by the younger brother of the Church President; the position of President of the Women's Association is held by his sister-in-law; and that of Director of Health Services is held by his nephew [58]. Similarly, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon (EELC), on the basis of ethnicity or tribe, an ecclesiastical region rejects a pastor because he is “foreign” to the region, even if it means resorting to local sons of lesser competence. The selection of spiritual leaders, directors of diaconal works (hospitals, educational institutions, etc.), or collaborators completely disregards the criterion of competence [59].

The relationship to money witnessed within churches and the desire to accumulate it, plunges church institutions in to corruption [7,60,61]. Operating costs are very high compared to returns in certain institutions (schools, the Protestant college, hospitals, etc.). There is low profitability, a declining volume of activity (the construction center), a deteriorating social climate, and demands for employee rights, including the primary school teachers' strike from March 17 to 21, 2006 [62]. Therefore, Use Your Talents should be understood as a paradigm shift.

Use Your Talents: A Paradigm Shift in the Approach to Development in African Lutheran Churches

A paradigm shift occurs “when a society redefines its hopes and fears, usually in the crucible of crises” [63]. A paradigm shift is a profound and fundamental transformation in the way we think, work, or see the world. During the 1990s, the concept of development underwent another shift. Development specialists began to question why investment and growth remained weak in Africa, despite Official Development Assistance and even after economic reforms [24]. Consequently, donors began to fundamentally rethink their development aid policies. To understand Use Your Talents as a paradigm shift in the missionary approach to development in African churches, it is important to analyze it as a variant of decolonial theory (A) on the one hand, and as a local and community-based approach to development (B) on the other.

A variant of decoloniality

Decolonial thought has emerged over the past thirty years, originating from the school of thoughts that initially started in South America around intellectuals such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Walter Mignolo, before becoming institutionally consolidated, primarily in the United States, and more recently spreading to Europe [64]. By challenging the legacy of colonialism, decoloniality aims to dismantle power structures and Eurocentric mindsets in order to promote the valorization of endogenous resources. To understand decoloniality, it is necessary to analyze it as a system of thought (1) and the valorization of endogenous knowledge (2).

A system of thought

Decoloniality, as a system of thought, is part of a theoretical reaction against Eurocentrism and the colonality of knowledge and power. The theory of decoloniality challenges the centrality of Eurocentric presuppositions and the idea that modernity

is universal. It also questions the continuation, even after independence, of colonial logics within the power structures and knowledge systems of countries in the Global South. The concept of "coloniality of power" was introduced by Quijano in 1994. According to this Peruvian sociologist, "the coloniality of power [...] normally includes feudal relations between dominant and dominated; sexism and patriarchy; game of influence, clientelism (friendship relations within the same age group) and patrimonialism in relations between the public and private spheres and especially between civil society and political institutions" (Ibid).

Researchers like Ki-Zerbo and Mbembe have focused on the colonial and postcolonial question, denouncing the various forms of exploitation, both pragmatic and symbolic, of Africa by the West [65]. Despite decolonization, there are forms of its survival known as post-colonialism, which are treated and analyzed in the same terms, namely the mobilization of resources no longer merely practical, as in the time of colonization and the Code Noir, but above all intellectual as a guarantee of renewed exploitation. This school of thought explores the shift or transition from the colonizing state/colonized population dynamic to relationships between former colonizers and new guardians of national orthodoxies, whose practices of submission or subversion converge with those of the past. Thus, this concept "envisages and names the historical phenomenon that has withstood time and decolonization." It therefore distinguishes itself from postcolonialism by circumventing "the ambiguity of 'post,' which risks reaffirming a linear vision of time, what comes after colonialism, either to end it or to prolong it." This ambiguity is conflated with the violence attributed by Vattimo (Nietzsche or Heidegger) to modern instrumental reason exercised against non-Western cultures (Ibid). The theory of decoloniality also contributes to the pluriversity of knowledge. In this sense, it argues for a recognition of the diversity of knowledge and modernities, paving the way to a dialogue between different worldviews. Here, as elsewhere, unique system of thought must be avoided. The questioning of neocolonialism has as its corollary the indigenous research methodology.

The valorization of endogenous resources

The theory of decoloniality implies a greater appreciation of endogenous resources. These endogenous resources consist of: local knowledge, cultural heritage, local funding, research, and economic and social practices. The theory of decoloniality contributes to the rehabilitation and safeguarding of locally existing knowledge that has been obscured by colonization, giving it a status equal to that of Western scientific knowledge. Indigenous knowledge includes:

At the heart of problem-solving strategies for local communities, especially the poor, they form an important component of general development knowledge. Community Action Plans (indigenous knowledge) These constitute under-utilized resources in the development process. Learning from Indigenous Knowledge, by first examining what local communities know and possess, improves understanding of local conditions and provides an enabling context for activities designed to help communities. Furthermore, understanding Indigenous Knowledge can improve client sensitivity. In addition, adapting global practices to local conditions can help increase the impact of development aid and ensure its sustainability. Sharing Indigenous Knowledge within and between communities can also help improve understanding between different communities and promote the cultural

dimension of development. Most importantly, investing in the exchange of Indigenous Knowledge and its integration into the assistance programs of the World Bank and its development partners can contribute to poverty reduction (Indigenous knowledge A framework for action, 1998: iii)

In this way, the reappropriation of local knowledge and resources allows societies to regain control of their development, without depending on externally imposed models. Decolonial theory also contributes to the valorization of cultural heritage. This includes the promotion of local languages, support for traditional arts, the restitution of cultural artifacts, and the valorization of value systems [64]. Decoloniality also raises questions of memory, such as the need to teach pre-colonial and colonial history, the construction of museums, and the restitution of art objects confiscated from Western museums [66].

As an approach that values local resources, Use Your Talents is grounded in the epistemological and theoretical considerations of Indigenous research methodology. This methodology draws inspiration from collaborative approaches to decolonizing research in Indigenous communities [22,23] This methodology aims to share Indigenous knowledge and experiences in a climate of trust and reciprocity [67].

A local and community-based approach to economic development

Community-based local economic development (CBLED) is an approach that has emerged in recent decades in several countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [68,69]. CBLED and it means that development is undertaken and supported by the local population, even if the initial impetus may have come from elsewhere [70]. The objective of this section is to analyze Use Your Talents as a local (1) and community (2) approach to development.

A local approach to development

In general, the Use Your Talents approach is designed in relation to a defined territory. This is what makes this approach "local." This spatial reference point is a level of observation and analysis. Its territorial approach is seen as "a way to better target interventions aimed at combating poverty, by adapting them to the specific local situation of the intervention area" [68]. As a local approach to development, Use Your Talents is part of the "bottom-up" approach.

The bottom-up approach emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was presented as an alternative to the top-down approach [32]. The starting point for analysis in the bottom-up approach is the perspective, or viewpoint, of the target group and the agents delivering the service. The focus is then on the individuals at the base of the pyramid, the "bureaucrats on the ground," because they inevitably play an active role and exert influence by making changes to policy [71,72]. These changes result both from the interpretations of policy by the various actors and from the interactions between the different interest groups involved [71,73]. The aim would be to grant local actors a degree of autonomy and empower them so that they can develop context-appropriate policies based on reforms [35,38,74-81]. It is no longer solely the actors who formulate policy or only the actors on the ground who determine its implementation, but rather both poles acting jointly [82-84]. Theoretically, the approaches of a "bottom-up approach to public policy" are increasingly relevant. This approach focuses on the influence of central institutional actors, as well as societal and community actors interacting with them in a process of

collaboratively shaping public policy [85]. This leads to the promotion of a "bottom-up" stance, in which societal, local, and community actors play a role in the design and implementation of public policy. Ultimately, public policy is seen as the result of the interaction between the social and the political in addressing public problems and producing change.

Use Your Talents, as a means of promoting the bottom-up approach to development, contributes to the establishment of the congregation as an agent of development. The congregation of a church is the interface with the population of its local area [12]. Generally speaking, the congregation is the basis of the organizational structure (parish, district, region, diocese, etc.) of a church. The congregation as an agent or actor of development emerges from a development approach known as Use Your Talents. The congregation forms the operational part of the six (6) constituent parts of an organization according to organizational theories [86-88]. In fact, the congregation, as a component of the broader social community, is closely linked to the segment of the population commonly referred to as the "common people," living daily with the hardships of poverty and development problems. The essential activities of a Church are carried out within the congregation. One might be tempted to say that, without the congregation, one cannot speak of a Church Upon analysis:

It can be observed that these initiatives by actors within grassroots ecclesiastical and social communities deviate from the classic model of development actions, generally driven from the top of the ecclesiastical organization, channeling external funding in the form of projects whose management is framed by administrative or procedural constraints that are often out of touch with the realities on the ground for implementation. [12].

The faithfuls, or those involved at various levels within a church's organizational structure, are first and foremost members of a congregation with which they identify. Moreover, within church structures, there is a distinction between clergy and laity. The latter includes, among others, the elites (political, administrative, economic, and intellectual) and laypeople who wear many hats. Church management is also the responsibility of the laity. They contribute to the development of their congregation [89]. Besides being part of a larger organizational structure, the congregation enjoys a degree of autonomy conferred by the overarching entity, a legal personality. .

It is within the diaconal framework that some congregations run out prison chaplaincy (visits and donations to prisoners) and hospital chaplaincy (visits to the sick, etc.). It is worth noting that the diaconal engagement of congregations still seems marginal or remains virtually unknown, despite the growing awareness or knowledge that the Church is by definition diaconal [11,12]. This is because most churches in African contexts have developed institutional diaconal services through the creation of specialized social works or structures entrusted with the practice of diaconal service or advocacy [12]. Therefore, Use Your Talents should be understood as a community-based approach to development.

A community-based approach to development

Development is also community-based because it is driven by the community. Regardless of the institutional structures put in place to achieve it, the concept of Local Development and Community Engagement (LDCE) expresses the community's desire to determine the direction and methods of its development [68,90]. Finally, LDCE relies on establishing a broad consensus within the community and between the immediate community

and other components of society: governments, businesses, etc. According to Swack and Masson [91], the establishment of permanent community organizations is central to the LDEC strategy: it is an essential means for the community to gain control of its resources [91]. And undoubtedly, the creation of community organizations is often seen by its proponents as a political tool providing access to resources that are subject to political control at all levels of government [92]. The DELC option is necessarily based on the assumption that the community possesses resources; a potential for development. This development, oriented towards the local entity and the community, is labeled community development [12,93]). An example is provided through the experience in Madagascar, the documentation and study of which contributed to the development of a community development approach proposed on a large scale in Africa and Asia, among other places.

The effort to formalize or theorize the Use Your Talents approach is taking place within the framework of a second phase of the research project, designated the Use Your Talents Knowledge Project. Therefore, Use Your Talents will enter a second phase of experimentation and replication, initially within other regions and/or ecclesiastical structures of the Malagasy Lutheran Church, and potentially beyond [7]. It is within this framework that Use Your Talents, as a development approach in its experimental phase, will be exported to certain countries, primarily in Africa: East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya); Southern Africa (Zimbabwe); Central Africa (Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo); and West Africa (Ivory Coast, Mali) (Ibid). This approach is also being exported out of Africa: Europe (Norway, France, etc.); Asia (Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong, etc.) These experimental development approaches are coordinated through the Use Your Talents-Innovation Project, which is financially supported by DIGNI, an umbrella organization for missionary organizations and development agencies in Norway. DIGNI receives funding from the Norwegian government through its Ministry of International Development and Cooperation.

Understanding Use Your Talents as a community-based approach requires defining its specific characteristics. These characteristics are outlined in the Phase III project document (Use Your Talents-Innovation Project 2017-2019). They are presented as active principles that constitute the resources mobilized or to be mobilized to produce the desired change or development: 1) Start with available resources; 2) Community members (those interested in the action) are true actors; 3) Integrated work; 4) Volunteering underpins development initiatives; 5) Networking; 6) Sustainability or long-term viability; 7) Ownership [15].

It is the combination of these characteristic traits, mobilized more or less together in operational situations, that gives Use Your Talents its community-based character compared to other development approaches and practices. It is worth noting that the Use Your Talents approach is part of an effort to translate and contextualize the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCS) approach developed in North America by authors such as Kretzmann and McKnight [94]. The work of these authors inspired another author, Luther K. Snow [95]. The latter conducted a longitudinal experiment of the ABCD approach in church contexts and produced a reference manual. Simultaneously, in the community sector, the Use Your Talents approach is exploring other areas for implementation. These include, among others, the education sector (at its various levels of organization), theological training, and the research sector. In

the field of research, the implementation of Use Your Talents is currently very well developed in theological schools and higher education institutions of member churches, many of which integrate this approach into their curricula. For example, VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway, operates a laboratory for experimenting and implementing Use Your Talents. It develops Master's and *PhD* programs within its university where the study of the Use Your Talents concept in relation to diaconal service plays a central role. The academic work of VID Specialized University in Oslo, Norway, illustrates how Use Your Talents constitutes a fruitful epistemic and heuristic investigation tool. Zo Ramiana Rakotoarison's *PhD* thesis, whose evocative subject is "Faith-based and Asset-based Congregational Diakonia in Madagasy Lutheran Context: A Qualitative Study of Use Your Talents Projects," defended at VID Specialized University in Oslo, Norway, in 2024, reinforces the epistemological and methodological perspectives of the Use Your Talents theory for investigating developmental approaches.

Conclusion

The objective was to analyze the theoretical foundations of the Use Your Talents approach. This is a local and community-based approach to development. As such, it challenges the traditional top-down approach that predominates in the missionary development approach of Lutheran churches in Africa. As a variant of decolonial theory, Use Your Talent questions the centrality of Eurocentric assumptions, the idea of universal modernity, and neo-colonialism. In this way, it aligns with indigenous research methodology. The Use Your Talent concept, in its operationalization within the Lutheran churches of Madagascar, Ethiopia, and Cameroon, asserts itself not only as an alternative and complementary approach to development [16] but also, and above all, as a critique and, most importantly, a paradigm shift in the missionary project. This article enriches the epistemology of social sciences, indigenous knowledge and development sciences, by establishing affinities between the Use Your Talents approach and decolonial theory.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks Miss. AYUK MBI Elizabeth, Lecturer at the Faculty of Law and Political Science of the University of Garoua (Cameroon) and Mr Shenwe Oliver, Head of Department, English, College Protestant of Ngaoundéré for proofreading the final draft of this text. His deep gratitude also goes to the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) through the Use Your Talents Institutional Development project for their collaboration and their support.

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