Challenges Faced by PCEA Church's Participation in Contributing to Socio-Economic Wellbeing of Communities in Laikipia West Sub-County, Laikipia County, Kenya

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https://doi.org/10.62049/jkncu.v6i2.609

Abstract

Efforts by faith-based organizations to promote socio-economic wellbeing in communities are often faced with multiple challenges which limit the impact and sustainability of their interventions. The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), guided by biblical teachings that advocate human welfare, has implemented various programs aimed at improving livelihoods in the community. This study therefore sought to evaluate the challenges faced by the PCEA church in its participation in socio-economic wellbeing of communities in Laikipia West sub-County. The study was anchored on the theory of Human Development. Descriptive mixed method design was adopted. The target population was households in areas where the PCEA has had socio-economic development projects in Laikipia West sub-County, PCEA church ministers, ordained elders and local administrators in Laikipia West sub-County. Primary data was collected using structured household questionnaires and Key Informant Interviews. Secondary data was collected by use of documentary analysis. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics where percentages and proportions were computed while the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The study findings revealed several challenges that hinder the PCEA Church from effectively promoting socio-economic development. These challenges include insecurity and hostility arising from cattle rustling, as well as bandit attacks that increase tensions among communities. In addition, bureaucratic processes within the church often delay the implementation of development projects. The study also identified insufficient financial and material resources as a major challenge. Furthermore, disunity among church leaders was found to undermine coordinated efforts aimed at advancing socio-economic development. The study recommended that the Church should address operational constraints such as insufficient funds, insecurity, and environmental challenges by partnering with government bodies, Non-Governmental Organizations, and local communities to enhance resource mobilization and program sustainability.

Keywords: PCEA Church, Socio-Economic Wellbeing, Community Development, Church Participation, Challenges

Introduction

Globally, churches and faith-based organizations have historically played an important role in promoting the social and economic wellbeing of communities through education, healthcare, and humanitarian programs. However, their participation in community development is increasingly faced with a range of emerging challenges. For instance, an analysis of churches in North America by Dunaetz (2023) revealed that many congregations are experiencing declining attendance, particularly among young people, with church leaders identifying difficulties related to youth engagement, retention of young adults, and sustaining attractive programs. In addition, growing congregations reported church conflict as a significant challenge affecting church growth and participation (Burdick, 2018). Satyavrata (2024) notes that churches across the world are being called upon to address complex matters such as socio-economic inequality, racial reconciliation, gender debates, climate change, and the growing influence of digital technologies and artificial intelligence. The Global Catholic Education Report by Wodon (2020) highlights that Catholic schools around the world, which have historically served disadvantaged communities, are increasingly struggling to sustain subsidized education due to declining financial resources. Similarly, mission hospitals and faith-based health facilities have faced operational difficulties such as rising costs, staff shortages, poor infrastructure, and shifts toward profit-oriented healthcare systems (Laing, et al., 2020). In addition to these institutional pressures, faith-based organizations involved in social service delivery often face administrative challenges, regulatory compliance requirements, and challenges related to volunteer recruitment and retention, limited funding, and technological constraints (Jahani & Parayandeh, 2024). These challenges collectively illustrate the increasingly complex environment in which churches and faith-based organizations operate globally as they seek to contribute to the wellbeing of communities.

Across Africa, churches and faith-based organizations continue to play a crucial role in supporting community wellbeing, often providing essential services in areas where the capacity of the state is limited (Ndzovu, 2020). Nevertheless, their participation in socio-economic development initiatives is frequently constrained by several structural and institutional challenges. In the health sector, faith-based organizations have been important partners in delivering healthcare services. However, research in Cameroon by van Wees and Jennings (2021) shows that collaboration between governments, donors, and faith-based organizations is often complicated by weak policy frameworks, inconsistent donor engagement, and tensions between state institutions and religious organizations. In some cases, faith-based organizations feel undervalued despite providing essential services, particularly in rural areas where they act as alternative providers of healthcare (Amankwah et al., 2026). Financial sustainability also remains a major concern for church-related organizations across the region. Mawudor (2021), found that many church-related institutions struggle with inadequate financial management systems, lack of clear administrative policies, and delays in financial reporting, all of which undermine effective decision-making. More broadly, churches across Africa also face challenges related to leadership capacity, infrastructure limitations, and dependence on external funding (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021). Evidence from church development projects in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania indicates that financial instability, shortage of skilled personnel, limited community participation, and inadequate strategic planning significantly hindered the sustainability of church-led development initiatives (Mahenge et al., 2024). Leadership transitions and mentorship challenges have also been identified within Pentecostal and neo-prophetic churches across the continent (White & Pondani, 2022). Within the African context, these challenges demonstrate the structural, socio-political, and resource limitations that churches must address while aiming to support community development and social wellbeing.

In Kenya, churches remain key actors in addressing social, economic, and moral issues within communities. Many churches sponsor schools, support vulnerable populations, promote environmental stewardship, and implement development programs aimed at improving livelihoods (Gitahi, 2025). Despite these contributions, several challenges continue to hinder the effectiveness of church participation in community wellbeing initiatives. Kioko (2020) focusing on the Redeemed Gospel Church in Makueni County found that limited financial resources, lack of administrative and management skills, poor communication structures, and lack of clear strategic plans significantly limited the ability of pastors and church leaders to implement sustainable development initiatives. Similar challenges have been observed in other church programs across the country. Gitonga et al. (2024) examining the Catholic Church's involvement in addressing environmental challenges revealed that inadequate collaboration with local stakeholders, limited community participation, and weak enforcement of environmental regulations reduced the effectiveness of these initiatives. Churches in Kenya have also encountered difficulties when collaborating with government institutions. For instance, Okutu et al. (2024) examining Catholic-sponsored public secondary schools in Nandi County revealed that mistrust, lack of consultation in leadership appointments in schools, and political interference often created tensions between the Church and government agencies responsible for education management. In addition, broader institutional and social challenges continue to affect church leadership and programming. These include leadership conflicts, corruption, proliferation of new religious movements, and political interference within church affairs (Nyandiri, 2020). Furthermore, programs addressing youth crisis and rehabilitation efforts by the church for street children and vulnerable populations often face shortages of skilled personnel, limited funding, and weak follow-up mechanisms (Nyaga et al., 2024; Osoro, 2025). Such challenges demonstrate that while churches in Kenya remain important partners in promoting development within the community, their effectiveness is often limited by financial, institutional, and socio-political factors.

In Kenya, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa is one of the mainline Protestant churches that has historically contributed to both the spiritual and socio-economic wellbeing of communities (Mwindi et al., 2024). The church traces its origins to missionary activities from Scotland in the late nineteenth century, with its establishment in Kenya dating back to 1891 (Wamagatta, 2007; Benedetto & McKim, 2009). Early missionary expansion enabled the church to gain a strong presence among communities in the central region of Kenya before gradually spreading to other parts of the country as Christian missions advanced into the interior (Mwangi, 2015). Over time, the church continued to expand its ministry and establish congregations in various regions, including areas such as including Laikipia West sub-County where it was established in 1915 (Kagema, 2012). Although the primary mission of the PCEA church is the promotion of the spiritual wellbeing of its members, its ministry has traditionally embraced a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnected nature of spiritual, social, and economic wellbeing. This perspective is rooted in Christian teachings that emphasize compassion and practical support for those in need, as reflected in biblical teachings such as Matthew 25:35–36. Consequently, the church has over the years engaged in various initiatives aimed at improving community livelihoods, including the establishment of schools, health facilities, and programs that promote education, skills development, and income-generating activities among local populations (Muriungi, 2013; PCEA, 2017; Mwindi et al., 2024). Through these initiatives, the church has remained an active participant in community development efforts in Kenya.

Within Laikipia West sub-County, churches have historically complemented government and non-governmental efforts in providing essential social services to communities (Majau et al., 2025). Several faith-based organizations have established institutions that support healthcare and social wellbeing in the region, including facilities such as Pope Benedict Hospital in Nyahururu and Consolata Mission Hospital. Among these actors, the PCEA Church has also contributed to community development through a number of initiatives within Laikipia West. These include the establishment of institutions such as PCEA Nyahururu Bethsaida Health Centre and educational initiatives like Nyahururu PCEA Academy, which support access to healthcare and education while promoting community welfare (Karanu et al., 2020). Through such interventions, the church has continued to participate in efforts aimed at improving the wellbeing of local communities. These interventions are particularly significant in a county where communities continue to experience various socio-economic challenges. Issues such as cattle rustling and banditry have periodically disrupted livelihoods and contributed to insecurity, forcing some residents to relocate and affecting access to essential services such as education and healthcare (Vernon & Nyamongo, 2020). Human–wildlife conflicts also remain a concern in some areas of the county, where interactions with wildlife occasionally led to loss of life, destruction of crops, and food insecurity (Manoa et al., 2020). In addition, socio-economic pressures associated with poverty and competition for limited resources have contributed to social tensions within communities (Kamais & Mosol, 2022). Cultural practices and gender inequalities, including early marriages and female genital mutilation in some pastoralist communities, further complicate efforts aimed at improving social and economic wellbeing (Njuguna, 2019). In such contexts, faith-based organizations have increasingly emerged as key actors in promoting peace, community cohesion, and socio-economic support through initiatives in education, healthcare, and community empowerment. Nevertheless, the effectiveness and sustainability of these interventions are often influenced by various operational, institutional, and contextual challenges that shape the extent to which churches can meaningfully contribute to community wellbeing.

Although earlier studies have examined the challenges facing church participation in socio-economic development across global, African, and Kenyan contexts, relatively little attention has been given to the specific challenges affecting the PCEA Church in contributing to the socio-economic wellbeing of communities in Laikipia West Sub-County. Most existing research has focused on broad areas such as general church development initiatives, education, healthcare services, and church–state relations, with less emphasis on the local and contextual factors that influence church involvement in community wellbeing. Against this background, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge by offering context-specific evidence on the challenges faced by the PCEA Church in its efforts to promote socio-economic wellbeing. It further provides localized recommendations that may help strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of church-led development initiatives in similar community settings.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive mixed methods research design. This research design was used because it enabled a combination of quantitative and qualitative perspectives, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding on the challenges faced by the PCEA Church in its participation in the socio-economic wellbeing of communities. The target population was households in areas where the PCEA has had socio-economic development projects in Laikipia West sub-County, PCEA church ministers, ordained elders and local administrators in Laikipia West sub-County. The study focused on Sipili, Kinamba, and Muthengera wards which were selected through purposive sampling because of the presence of PCEA development projects in these areas. The combined population of these wards was estimated at approximately 1,200 households. The Neumann (2000), sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 120 households. Quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires administered to the selected households, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews conducted with the key informants. The research instruments were subjected to reliability and validity testing prior to the main data collection exercise. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, where frequencies, percentages, and proportions were computed to summarize the responses. Qualitative data obtained from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the research problem.

Results and Discussions

Challenges Faced by PCEA Church In Contributing to Socioeconomic Development in Laikipia West Sub-County

The study aimed to identify the challenges encountered by the PCEA church in contributing to socio economic development. The identification of the challenges helps in pinpointing specific barriers to the implementation of successful socio-economic initiatives by the church. Table 1 shows that insecurity due to cattle rustling was a major issue within the region, as reported by 42 respondents at 38.18%. This suggests that cattle rustling remains a major challenge hindering the achievement of socio-economic wellbeing of communities within Laikipia West sub-County. Given that livestock is an important source of income for many households within this region, the loss of animals through cattle rustling affects their livelihoods and economic stability. The effects move beyond reducing the household incomes to also increasing the levels of poverty, thereby limiting the ability of community members to participate in development initiatives. This finding supports the earlier findings by Karanu (2020), that marginalizing the youths contributed to broader socio-economic issues like increased crime and retarded economic growth. Further, the findings suggest that efforts led by the church may achieve little success where persistent livestock theft continues to weaken the economic foundation of the communities they seek to support.

A total of 52 respondents (47.27%) acknowledged the general feeling of fear and distrust characterizing the local communities due to attacks by bandits. Insecurity at this level tends to be a significant obstacle to socioeconomic development, as fear of personal safety could discourage community members from engaging in development projects. Fear of attacks may discourage people from engaging in farming, operating businesses, attending community meetings, or participating in development projects. Such conditions can reduce the effectiveness of church interventions aimed at improving socio-economic wellbeing. The finding therefore suggest that a secure environment is crucial for development initiatives to thrive because people mostly participate and benefit from development initiative when they feel safe. The interview narratives added richness to this picture when a local chief observed:

"It is clear that bandit attacks have filled our community with fear and uncertainty. People have abandoned farms, businesses, and even their homes due to the attacks, causing food shortages and hard economic times. Some places are now deserted since families have fled for safety, making it difficult for any kind of development efforts to continue."

Accordingly, 36 of them, or 33% of the total, identified bureaucratic church processes as their challenge, which could imply delays in the implementation of projects due to internal governance issues. This shows that internal organizational structures can influence the effectiveness of development initiatives. While these structures are required for accountability and proper management of resources, long decision-making processes may delay project implementation and reduce responsiveness to community needs. This quantitative evidence is supported by Mbamalu (2002) when he finds that divisions within church leadership hinder effective engagement with and progress of communities. Based on this finding, there is a need for church institutions to balance accountability and efficiency so as to respond to development needs within the local communities effectively.

Inadequate funds and resources were a significant challenge facing the PCEA church in implementing its socioeconomic activities, as noted by 83 respondents constituting 75.45% of the participants. This revealed that financial sustainability remained a major challenge faced by the Church in participation of socio-economic development. Financial constraints deter not only the establishment but also the level and sustainability of programs, thus limiting the overall impact of the church in community development. Development programs such as educational institutions, healthcare services, water projects and others aimed at empowering community members requires substantial capital and continuous investment for them to keep running.

This statistical inclination is reiterated in qualitative statements, where one community member stated:

While the PCEA church has contributed greatly to the development in this area, they have several challenges. One of the major issues is financial constraints. Most of its projects involve funding; for example, water and education projects need a lot of money, while the church relies on member contributions and donors, which are not enough at times. For instance, they had intended to extend a project on borehole expansion at Mukogodo, but because of limited funds, they did not complete it and were unable to extend clean drinking water to all villages.

Dependence on member contributions and external donors may therefore limit the church's ability to initiate and sustain such interventions. From the perspective of the Theory of Human Development, such financial challenges highlight the point that contextual limitations-economic and institutional-can act as a bottleneck for development. The theory postulates that human development works out fine when interventions are well-supported by resources and structuring systems. These findings agree with those of Ngatia et al. 2019, who also found out that financial constraints limit the church from fully engaging in socioeconomic activities and thus conclude that resource limitations are a common thread affecting socio-economic contributions. Kariithi 2019 also noted that most congregations were still faced with challenges of inadequate funding to address their developmental needs. This suggests that the financial challenges experienced by PCEA Church in Laikipia West are reflective of broader challenges facing churches involved in development work across many developing contexts.

Nine respondents representing 8.18% reported disunity among church leaders as an indication of internal conflicts that could affect decision-making and strategic planning. Although only a small proportion of respondents identified disunity among church leaders as a challenge, the finding remains important because leadership unity contributes majorly to the success of development initiatives. The differences among leaders may affect the project planning, resource allocations and the process of implementing the projects, thereby reducing the effectiveness of church interventions. Effective leadership is important in managing the interactions between the stakeholders involved, allocating resources and maintaining confidence in development programs. The finding therefore emphasizes importance of fostering unity and having a shared vision among church leaders to enhance the sustainability of socio-economic initiatives.

Divisions promote conflict, retard joint developmental processes, and widen further the existing inequalities among the various ethnic groups. The fact that 42 respondents or 38.18% recognize tribalism as a challenge means that there is persisting social division threatening to tear the community apart and thus requiring continued peacebuilding efforts. Socio-economic development initiatives often depend on cooperation among community members, and ethnic fights may reduce participation and mistrust with people citing unequal access to development benefits. The findings suggest that churches are not only development actors but also important institutions for promoting peace and social integration. Similar concerns have been documented in other African contexts where ethnic divisions have hindered development efforts and weakened social cohesion. The finding therefore highlights the importance of peacebuilding initiatives alongside socio-economic interventions to promote sustainable community development.

Qualitative evidence reinforced these insights, as one local chief emphasized:

"In regions marked by ethnic conflict, security is a big issue. The peacebuilding work that the Church does is important, but that must be sustained by the local authorities in order to be effective."

The fact that 76 respondents, 69.09%, acknowledge the frequency of droughts, refers to great environmental obstacles to agricultural productivity-a very essential aspect of socio-economic stability in Laikipia West sub-County. The high proportion of respondents who identified drought as a challenge demonstrates the extent to which environmental factors influence socio-economic wellbeing within the region. Since many households depend on agriculture and livestock for their livelihoods, prolonged droughts reduce food production and lower household incomes which may increase poverty levels. From the findings, climate-related challenges are becoming development challenges because they directly affect the communities that church programs seek to support. This supports the 2022 Network report that more than 4.2 million people in arid and semi-arid areas are suffering from acute food insecurity, hence indicating the alarming stage of drought. This quantitative result indicates that churches involved in development work may need to adopt longer-term approaches rather than relying solely on short-term relief interventions.

Interview data provided deeper context, as a Sipili parish minister observed:

"While the church has done a commendable job, the challenge of climate change is real. Inadequate water supplies, prolonged droughts, and unpredictable weather patterns have affected agriculture and water supply projects. Some of the boreholes drilled by the church have dried up due to declining water tables. There is a need for more sustainable solutions like rainwater harvesting and alternative farming methods."

Political instability or manipulation may divert attention from community needs or create barriers to program implementation. 48 respondents, or 43.63%, noted political interferences as a challenge, which in itself shows that external politics can complicate the church's effort in doing development work. On political interference, one parish minister reflected:

"Sometimes, when the church tries to implement development projects, politicians want to take credit for them or influence how they are distributed. This has created tensions in some cases and slowed down project implementation. In addition, inflation and rising costs of materials have made it hard for us to complete projects as anticipated.

These findings agree with those of Obwoge (2017), who pointed out that religious organizations are equally facing different challenges which hinder their efforts to initiate community-based projects that can improve the socio-economic outlook. The findings therefore demonstrate the importance of maintaining accountability and constructive engagement with political actors while preserving the independence of church-led development programs. Overall, the intertwining quantitative trends and qualitative narratives reveal that challenges in PCEA Church initiatives are multidimensional, ranging from financial, environmental, political, and social spectrums. Integration of both data types offers a comprehensive understanding of the complex realities affecting church-led socioeconomic development in Laikipia West Sub-County. While some of these challenges are specific to the context of Laikipia West Sub-County, many reflect broader issues experienced by faith-based organizations involved in community development across Kenya and other developing regions. The findings therefore suggest that enhancing the effectiveness of church-led socio-economic interventions requires collaboration with government agencies, development partners, and local communities to address the structural factors affecting development outcomes.

Table 1: Challenges Faced by PCEA church in Contributing to Socioeconomic Wellbeing in Laikipia West sub-County

	% (n=110)
Insecurity and hostility due to cattle rustling	38.18
Bandits' attacks increasing suspension among communities	47.27
Church bureaucracies that delay projects	32.27
Insufficient funds and other resources	75.45
Disunity among church leaders	17.27
Tribalism that compromises peace	38.18
Frequent drought leading to crop production	69.09
Political interferences	43.63

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The study concludes that the PCEA Church makes contributes meaningfully to improving the socio-economic wellbeing of communities in Laikipia West Sub-County. However, its efforts are influenced by financial, environmental, social, political, and institutional challenges. Challenges such as limited funding, drought, insecurity, and political interference shows that church-led development work takes place within a wider environment that influences how effectively such initiatives can be implemented sustainably.

These findings further indicate that the success of faith-based organizations in promoting community wellbeing is influenced not only by their internal strengths, but also by the broader socio-economic conditions and governance structures in the areas where they operate. In this regard, the challenges observed in the PCEA Church are not unique but reflect issues commonly experienced by many faith-based organizations involved in community development in Kenya and other similar contexts.

To enhance the sustainability and impact of their interventions, there is a need for enhanced collaboration between churches, government institutions, development partners, and local communities. Such partnerships would help address the underlying challenges more effectively and strengthen the overall contribution of faith-based organizations to community development.

Recommendation

The Church should consider strengthening its financial base by diversifying sources of funding. This can be achieved through the development of income-generating projects, building partnerships with development organizations, and enhancing community-based fundraising initiatives to support the sustainability of its programs.

To address the challenges posed by drought, the Church should take a more proactive role in promoting climate resilience within the community. This may include educating community members on climate adaptation strategies, supporting rainwater harvesting initiatives, and collaborating with relevant stakeholders to improve access to water through interventions such as borehole drilling.

In matters of insecurity, there is a need for closer collaboration between local communities and security agencies responsible for peacebuilding and law enforcement. Strengthening these partnerships would help enhance early response mechanisms, promote safety, and create a more stable environment for development activities.

To minimize the effects of political interference, the Church and other stakeholders should strengthen engagement and establish clear transparency and accountability mechanisms. This would help ensure that development projects remain community-driven, fairly implemented, and less influenced by external political interests.

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