



## **Institutional functionality and economic empowerment across churches in Western Region, Kenya: A reassessment of Weberian perspectives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The debate on the relationship between economic development and Christianity remains one of the most advanced issues within the sociological circle. The aim of the study is to reassess the traditional Weberian perspective of economic empowerment beyond Protestant doctrine by examining Institutional functionality across Western Region Churches. The study was guided by Weberian theory by Max Weber (1864-1920), from his work “The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism” and Functionalism theory associated with Émile Durkheim 1895. The study was anchored on a qualitative descriptive design. The research was conducted in four Counties of Western Kenya: Busia, Bungoma, Kakamega, and Vihiga. The study targeted 4065 church members, which included members and their clerics. A total sample of 408 respondents (384 members & 24 clerics) who took part in the study. Data collection was conducted through Focus Group Discussions with members and Interviews with clerics. Qualitative data was analysed thematically through the identification of patterns and themes that were recurrent. The study demonstrated that economic empowerment should move beyond Weber’s doctrinal emphasis toward result-oriented actions to realize economic mobility. The study demonstrates that this is possible given that initiatives taken by some of the churches in context, such as supporting education, healthcare, business and church-based financial initiatives for members, can uplift members’ economic status. The study further reveals that institutional capacity determines the direction the church takes in formulating and implementing its economic transformation agenda, with the support of proper governance. In this case, governance determines how resources are mobilized and wisely used, initiatives that are prioritized and evaluation of the practical outcomes to determine areas of improvement. Churches should strengthen their institutional functionality by translating religious values of stewardship, discipline, and responsibility into practical, accountable, and sustainable economic empowerment programmes that enhance members’ financial literacy, entrepreneurship capacity, and overall economic wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Economic Empowerment, Institutional Functionality, Christianity, Weberian Perspectives, Church

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The debate on the relationship between economic development and Christianity remains one of the most advanced issues within the sociological circle. In 1905, Max Weber's thesis on The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism reshaped the discussions of the time on the role of Christianity in economic development, leaning more towards the doctrinal angle. Weber argued that capitalism was a unique product of ascetic Protestantism, particularly Calvinist theology. His argument shifted the aspect of work from being secular to a spiritual calling, which promoted the accumulation of wealth by the means of disciplined frugality (Weber, 2002). For a period exceeding a century now, Weber’s arguments have dominantly served as a theoretical framework for analysis of faith and economic development (Landes, 1998; Barro & McCLeary 2003). However, his work majorly bordered on early European Protestantism, with the role of protestant doctrine given all the attention and failing to capture the role of other Christian traditions, particularly Roman Catholic practices (Tropman, 2002).

The global implications of Christianity on economic-related issues imply a shift in both doctrinal and functionality approach to various practices. As Christianity continued to metamorphose geographically and demographically, the analytical limitations of Weber’s arguments increasingly became apparent (Walls, 2002; Jenkins, 2011). In contemporary Christianity, the ecosystem has grown into a mix of denominations that operate differently based on the functional policies in place at their establishments. When referring to Christianity, it is now important that one considers the origin, doctrine and practices of the denomination, despite all being aligned to Jesus Christ.

In Africa, Christianity has evolved into something unique worth paying close attention to. Initially, each region, tribe or even clan in Africa enjoyed its own religious practices. However, when colonization cropped up, various

religions were introduced to Africa. Today in Africa, Christianity is leading, especially in Sub-Saharan countries. Catholicism and Protestantism both enjoy large followings and economic development evidence. However, something special happened as Christianity grew in Sub-Saharan Africa: the blending of Christianity and African traditional religion. This gave birth to African Initiated churches, which approach economic development from a different angle as opposed to western-originated Christianity (Gifford, 1998; Meyer, 2007). With such a dynamic socio-religious landscape, it is impossible to understand the economic development through classical protestant doctrines pegged on European idealism alone, such as that of Weber (Freeman, 2012; Ter Haar, 2011).

In this case, it is important that scholarship should extend to examining a holistic approach to economic development, mapped through Christianity, across various churches. Going by contemporary Christianity, where beliefs and practices affect the outcome of economic development is important in addition to what has been discussed on the role of doctrine. By looking at the manifestation of beliefs and practices, functional role of Christianity is portrayed through evidence-based developmental indicators (Gifford, 2015; Woodberry, 2012). Functional Christianity emphasizes on the contribution of the church social and economic development of an individual and the community at large with a focus on church governance, resource mobilization and infrastructural footprint (Mercer et al., 2008; Offutt, 2015). Effective functioning of Christian institutions can be reflected through building of human capital (by establishing learning institutions and health care facilities), creating micro-financial institutions (like SACCOs) and developing formal network of trust (Marshall, 2009).

In the western part of Kenya, historical developments can be attributed to churches, which have played a major role (Speitkamp, 2009). Western Region is characterized with complexity of Christianity denominations such as Catholicism, Protestantism and AICs. Initially, the region was dominated by historic mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic, the Anglican Church of Kenya, and the Quakers, just to mention a few. Currently along these historic mainline churches, Pentecostalism and AICs influence is growing at a much quicker pace, affecting the demographics of the region (Modise, 2018). However, prior studies do not capture well the expansive role that the denominations have played, beyond the protestant ethic arguments of Weber, which narrows down to doctrinal elements.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Max Weber's thesis primarily attributed economic development to protestant ethics; however, the metamorphosis within Christianity has shifted the scholarly discussion on its relationship with economic development. While Weber's work focused on doctrinal elements of Protestantism, it significantly overlooked other critical Christian practices. Currently, the argument goes beyond doctrinal element to the overall institutional functionality. The functionality can be understood from institutional governance, resource mobilization and infrastructural development, devoid of the denomination. In the Western region of Kenya, existing literature fails to capture the historic developmental trails beyond Weber's arguments of Protestantism. By failing to look at the church-based and community-wide development, particularly from a functional perspective of Christianity, the true economic impact of cross-denominational development in the region remains unexplained, save on the basis of doctrine which privileges Protestantism over other denominations. This study sought to bridge this gap.

### 1.2 Objective of the Study

To reassess the traditional Weberian perspective of economic empowerment beyond Protestant doctrine by examining Institutional functionality across Western Region Churches.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by two theories: Weberian Theory and Functionalism Theory

#### 2.1.1 Weberian Theory

Weberian theory was advanced by Max Weber (1864-1920), from his work "The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism. Weber argues that religion possesses crucial ethics and values that immensely promote individuals' economic empowerment. According to Weber (2002) values such as embracing education, thrift, rationality, taking work as a vocation, hard work and discipline propel individuals to greater economic heights. He argued that such values and ethics shape one's attitudes and practices, which lead to productivity, wealth creation and responsible economic decision making.

In the context of this study, Weberian theory was relevant as it helped explain the concepts behind the church's choice to engage in economic empowerment activities. The study draws on Weber's values and ethics to argue that they provide the background against which the practical approach to economic empowerment can be advanced.

### 2.1.2 Functionalism Theory

Functionalism is a sociological theory associated with Émile Durkheim 1895, a French philosopher and sociologist. Even though the theory is largely associated with Durkheim, the theory was advanced by other sociologists, like Talcott Parsons, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The theory posits that society is made up of several institutions (or structures) such as schools, hospitals, religious institutions, governments and business institutions. The structures serve independent functions but depend on each other to maintain societal stability and cohesion. For instance, religion, in this case, the church, has a role to play in maintaining societal order by providing moral and spiritual guidance, helping the government of the day in maintaining law and order (Kalkan, 2023). The theory is built on the foundation of various tenets, including social stability and order, societal cohesion and integration, adaptation, functionality and interdependence of the social institutions (Fletcher, 1957). The theory was imperative in this study as it help explain the element of institutional functionality of the Western region churches.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

Mwangi et al. (2025) conducted a study on “the Role of Christian Faith-Based organization (CFBOs) in Poverty Reduction in Turkana West Sub-County of Kenya.” The study established that CFBOs within the area of study have been instrumental in ensuring that the community is getting primary social services such as education, healthcare and food security. This is achieved through various church programs that aim to link Christians to educational scholarship programs for children from poor backgrounds and medical care provision. Additionally, CFBOs have been applauded for being on forefront to provide agricultural inputs, boosting the agriculture and food security in general. However, some of the challenges that CFBOs have faced in their fight for a better society include: lack of resources, infrastructural inadequacy, which hinders the sustainability of initiated programs and lack of political goodwill. The study, therefore, concluded that collaboration between religious and non-religious actors is imperative if the sustainability of the poverty alleviation programs is to be achieved.

Mwaura and Nzengya (2022) dealt with a review of previous research on “The Role of the Church in Socio-Economic Development of the Rural Poor in the Sub-Saharan Region: Insights from Previous Research and Future Research Directions.” Findings of the study indicate that the role of the church in economic development is threefold: education, health, and empowerment initiatives. However, the study reveals that there are no studies that have evaluated the long-term effectiveness of the programs that the church puts in place, reiterating that this is a breaking point for sustainability. The study concludes that there is a need for improvement in the manner in which various programs are coordinated and executed for sustainability results.

Ndzi (2025) examined the “Church’s Role in Alleviating Poverty within Its Congregation.” The purpose of the study was to carry out an assessment of the extent to which the church contributes to poverty alleviation among members. The study reveals that the church has the capacity to network and mobilize resources, which can be channelled to more impoverished and rural communities for poverty alleviation projects. The study emphasizes churches that have endeavoured to go from microcredit schemes and training of their members on financial security and business management skills. However, the study reveals that, despite the church’s vital role in poverty alleviation, lack of enough resources has acted as a major impediment to achieving desired success. In this regard, therefore, the study concludes that, for the church to realize its full potential in poverty alleviation, there is a need for enhanced collaboration with external partners, government included.

O’Neil (2017) investigated the effectiveness of the Faith-Based Interventions in Poverty Reduction, with a Focus on the Evidence Supporting these Efforts. Findings of the study show that Faith-Based interventions have an impact to some extent on poverty alleviation, specifically in the areas of health and education. The study cites examples from India and Uganda where FBOs have played a very significant role in improving mental health and providing medical assistance to members of the community, in addition to educational programs. A crucial issue to note from the findings is the fact that the effectiveness of the interventions is dependent on the FBOs’ alignment with the local cultural and socio-economic contexts. In conclusion, the study posits that in their efforts to alleviate poverty, FBOs should consider programs and projects that produce measurable and sustainable results.

Establishing church-related SACCOs directly improves the saving habits of Christians and influences them to be business-oriented. Additionally, the study argues that such initiatives that reduce the burden placed on members in matters of project contributions, as the proceeds of the SACCOs can be used to fund such projects. Finally, the study posits that such financial institutions can provide low-interest loans for members to engage in serious business with little defaulting as they are accountable to the church board during the repayment period. Additionally Church-based SACCOs are very instrumental for poverty alleviation. The author discusses the concept of pooling local resources and how it benefits FBOs through the provision of reliable, value-oriented and alternative borrowing source, rather than depending on traditional profit-driven loaning facilities like banks.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

The study was anchored on a qualitative descriptive design which was imperative in examining the lived economic realities, institutional functionality and varied theological perspectives across churches in western region of Kenya. The research design played a critical role in enabling the researcher to capture rich qualitative insights from FGDs and Interviews without variable manipulation or endeavouring rigid statistical modelling.

#### 3.2 Study Area

The research was conducted in four Counties of Western Kenya: Busia, Bungoma, Kakamega, and Vihiga. These Counties were selected due to their high poverty index and highly diversified Christian religious beliefs and practices, including Mainline Christian churches, African Initiated Churches, and the Pentecostal Charismatic Churches. Each county was represented by urban and rural settings, enabling diversified data collection (Gifford, 2015).

#### 3.3 Study Population and Sampling

The study targeted all Christians who live in the four counties of study, which included church members and clergy. A total sample of 408 respondents (384 members & 24 clerics) who took part in the study. To attain the sample, the researcher first sampled the churches through stratified sampling, placing churches into three major denominational affiliation, which were mainline churches (Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Friends Church and Salvation Army), Pentecostal Charismatic Ministry (Deliverance Church, Redeemed Gospel Church, Winners Chapel and Word of Faith Church) and African Initiated Churches (African Divine Church, Legio Maria, Dini Ya Msambwa and African Israel Church Nineveh). This yielded a total of 12 churches. The researcher went for diversity of denominations to enable him to capture a clear image of Christianity within the study area and capture diverse economic realities among Christians. This was imperative as the study area enjoys diversity in theological, social, cultural and religious inclinations, all intertwined, affecting the economic outcomes of Christians. The researcher ensured that the sampled churches had more than 150 members to obtain a concentrated sample and avoid missing enough members for FGD.

#### 3.4 Data Collection

The study yielded both primary and secondary data. Primary data collection was done using focus group discussion guide and interview guides for members and clerics, respectively, supplemented by an observation checklist. Secondary data was collected from journal articles, books and other relevant sources. These data collection methods were imperative as they helped the researcher to obtain both respondents' perspectives and experiences and supporting contextual information.

#### 3.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analysed thematically through the identification of patterns and themes that were recurrent. Frequencies and percentages were presented through table and explained and thereafter discussed.

#### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study considered various critical ethical issues regarding human subject research. First, the researcher ensured that participants voluntarily participated in the study through informed consent. Additionally, participants were informed that they were at liberty to withdraw from the study any time they felt uncomfortable. Given the nature of the study, as it was touching sensitive economic issues, confidentiality was strictly observed by the researcher, who only assigned random numbers to respondents for anonymity purposes.

### IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

#### 1.1 Church Initiatives for Economic Empowerment

The current study sought to find out the initiatives taken by the churches in Western region, Kenya, for economic empowerment of the members and community at large. The emerging themes are presented in table 1 below and thereafter discussions.

**Table 1***Clerics' Position on the Role of the Church in Economic Empowerment*

|                                                  | Type/Statement                              | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| <b>Financial Education and Literacy</b>          |                                             |           |            |
|                                                  | Budgeting and Saving Workshops              | 12        | 50%        |
|                                                  | Biblical Stewardship                        | 16        | 67%        |
|                                                  | Education on Investing                      | 13        | 54%        |
| <b>Vocational Development and Skill Training</b> |                                             |           |            |
|                                                  | Livelihood Training                         | 17        | 71%        |
|                                                  | Youth mentorship Programs                   | 8         | 33%        |
|                                                  | Digital Literacy                            | 5         | 21%        |
| <b>Capital and Financial Initiatives</b>         |                                             |           |            |
|                                                  | Saving and credit-cooperation (Sacco)       | 8         | 33%        |
|                                                  | Microfinance Initiatives                    | 12        | 50%        |
|                                                  | Investment groups                           | 17        | 71%        |
| <b>Business Support and Networking</b>           |                                             |           |            |
|                                                  | Business coaching                           | 6         | 25%        |
|                                                  | Connecting with markets                     | 4         | 17%        |
|                                                  | Market-place Ministry                       | 4         | 17%        |
| <b>Community Programs and Projects</b>           |                                             |           |            |
|                                                  | Agricultural Projects                       | 20        | 83%        |
|                                                  | Church-owned Enterprises                    | 18        | 75%        |
|                                                  | Health-driven programs                      | 10        | 42%        |
|                                                  | Establishing of Primary & Secondary Schools | 8         | 33%        |
|                                                  | Establishing of Colleges and Universities   | 6         | 25%        |

**4.1.1 Financial Education and Literacy**

Data from the table above show that clerics are totally aware of the roles that the church ought to be playing in promoting economic empowerment of the members and the community at large. The responses, as depicted in the table, indicate that clerics are aware that the role of the church is not only on spiritual alignment but also economic guidance through developing skills, offering social and economic support and community empowerment. Even though the frequencies differ on various themes in place, one aspect that comes out clearly is that there are efforts being deployed to this effect.

The data on the financial literacy and education theme shows that biblical stewardship received the highest possible support, with 16 (67%) clerics indicating that this was being done in their churches. This implies that clerics have a strong belief that teaching members how to effectively and responsibly manage resources is significant in shaping their economic status. This aligns with the Weberian argument that religious teachings impact individuals' economic behaviour, hence determining economic status. Teachings on stewardship encourage church members to focus on using well the resources that God has given them and avoid wastage as they are accountable before God. The data further shows that 12 (50%) of the clerics indicated that they have programs on budgeting and savings, while 13 (54%) supporting the element of educating their members on investment. In this case, Weber's reasoning on the role of religion in promoting discipline, planning, saving and investment is demonstrated.

This study found that some sampled AICs showed limited engagement in this area, while clerics of the churches in this category appeared to hold a different position. For instance, while discussing the element of financial literacy and education, 5 clerics from this category defended themselves with almost similar sentiments, pointing towards their role in disciplining, but not making people rich. For instance, one of the clerics who said these words that echo what the other said:

*"Kuna sababu Mungu alinifanya kuwa kuhani na wala sio kuwa Mwalimu wa mambo ya pesa. Ukweli ni kwamba mtu hawezi kukuambia yuko na pesa ngapi na anapanga kutumia vipi. Hata mimi pesa yangu ni siri yangu na kile na panga ni Mungu tu peke yake ndio anajua. Ukiambia wanadamu watakuharibia mambo yako. Kwanza wachungaji wengine ni wabaya sana. Ukiwaeleza mipango yako wanaharibu ili ubaki mtumwa wao tu"* (Cleric 15, Personal Communication, August 28, 2025).

This is translated as

*"There is a reason why God made me a Priest and not a financial literacy teacher. The truth of the matter is that nobody can tell you the amount of money he has and how he plans to use it. Even for me, the money I have is a private matter and whatever I plan to do with it is only God who knows. If you reveal your plans to men, they end up dealing you a blow. By the way, some pastors are not good. If you reveal your plans to them, they scatter them so that you can remain their subjects,"* (Cleric 15, Personal Communication, August 28, 2025).

Such an example demonstrates the role of religion functioning in one area, the spiritual aspect, and is dysfunctional in other areas, like economic empowerment and literacy towards its members. Second, the respondent in context associates financial secrecy with the cannibal nature of people, as most of the African beliefs go. In this case, the element of witchcraft and being short-changed comes first, hence, establishing fear amongst the members. However, one key issue to note in this case, as observed by the researcher, was the issue of the level of education. Research indicates that the majority of the clerics within AICs have no proper educational background, implying that they are not exposed to some practical realities (Falaye, 2015). Such is demonstrated through instances of the narration in context.

Another theme discussed with the clergy during the interviews was the availability of vocational development and skill training in entrepreneurship. Data from the table indicate that 17 (71%) clerics supported the fact that their endeavour livelihood trainings. This involves organizing training on tailoring, soap making, poultry farming, catering and agribusiness. This is one of the responses that had the highest support. This implies that some clerics invest their time and church resources to ensure that individuals are equipped with the necessary skills that guarantee income generation. This relates to the Weberian perspective, which emphasizes the role of work ethic in fostering productivity and enhancing income generation. The finding resonates with Mwangi et al. (2025) who found that Christian FBOs play a significant role in reducing poverty through spearheading programs such as agricultural productivity and access to social services. However, the study established, as the data in the table shows, that youth mentorship programs and digital literacy were not well incorporated, as they were supported by 8 (33%) and 5 (21%) clerics, respectively. The low percentage simply points towards the dysfunctional role of the church in empowering youth who may be idle and lack enough resources to engage in income-generating activities.

The researcher sought to establish why these programs were not given priority by most of the churches and varied responses were given. For instance, 21 (88%) clerics insinuated that the cost associated with running youth mentorship programs was so high to the point that the church could not afford. Additionally, 12 (50%) clerics indicated that the youth are not readily available to be mentored, pointing to their reluctance to participate in church activities and general negative perception about the church. Finally, 18 (75%) of the clerics indicated that youth are not considered the majority, as most of them are still in the transition stage and end up getting proper training from an institution of higher learning. This implies that emphasis is placed on individuals who are willing to be available and mostly elderly individuals who may be termed vulnerable.

Church members had mixed reactions on this, where the majority 220(54%) stated that there were very few activities on financial education and literacy programs within their churches. Then, 82(20%), majority from Pentecostal charismatic churches indicated that they had such programs in place, especially during seminars and conferences. The remaining group of respondents remarked that financial literacy and education is something that is personal and not responsibility of the church. Generally, the researcher noted that different churches approach this issue differently, with majority teaching more on stewardship, without giving their members possible options to help maintain, multiply and scatter their resources for productivity. This is an indication that the church does very little in ensuring that the Weberian ideas, which mirrors stewardship and discipline towards finances and related-resources are demonstrated through tangible actions. Therefore, teachings without proper implementation strategies as it is in this context implies weak institutional functionality, leading to derailed economic development.

#### 4.1.2 Capital and Financing Initiatives

The study further investigated whether clerics had capital, financial programs and investment groups in their churches. Responding to this, 17(71%) clerics supported the fact that their churches had this initiative of empowerment. The Majority of the clerics who discussed this issue opined that it is not easy to bring everybody on board at once, but supporting individuals with capital to start businesses and little finances for sustainability has been the order of the day. Furthermore, during the interviews, 6 (25%) clerics said that they encouraged their members to form groups and invest in businesses that would enable them to make money and improve their living standards. However, one challenge that was mentioned in this category was the fact that a low percentage of church members manage to sustain the businesses that are given to them by the church, causing a problem of trust among other members.

Still on the same theme, the study findings show that only 16 (67%) clerics supported the fact that they have SACCOs while 12 (50%) clerics supported the issue of having microfinance initiatives. These initiatives are good because they act as a bridge to access financial support at low interest. The researcher sought to understand how this works. The majority of clerics who indicated that the two initiatives are within their church structures indicated that they do so at a regional or headquarters level. In this case, several churches come together to create a fund that can serve members in terms of loans and dividends. The researcher realized that the initiative of SACCOs and microfinance is working well in mainstream churches and Pentecostal Charismatic churches. However, the challenge again was with the AICs, whose clerics opined that they only come in during times of need and contribute money to empower each other.

The study sought to establish the reason behind lack of SACCOs and microfinances in AICs and established a number of reasons. First, out of the 8 clerics that were in this category, 4 (50%) of them indicated that there is poor leadership, with most of the leaders at the top serving personal interests. Furthermore, the issue of mismanagement of resources cropped up, with 6 clerics pointing toward lack of clear records on church finances and other resources. However, one critical aspect that came out strongly was the way most of the AICs' clerics argue about worldly possessions, in that they prioritize salvation, spiritual readiness, and healing, in preparation for the next life, over wealth accumulation.

Under business support and networking, results point towards very low support. Business coaching was supported by only 6 clerics, representing 25%, while connecting members with markets and marketplace ministry each received 4 responses, representing 17%. This is a significant weakness. It suggests that churches may support general economic empowerment but are less involved in helping members grow businesses, access markets, or build business networks. From Weber's perspective, this limits the practical effect of religious economic values. Hard work and discipline are important, but without market access, business knowledge, and networks, members may still remain economically limited. This finding mirrors Mwaura and Nzengya (2022) concerns that despite churches contributing to economic empowerment, they are challenged by coordination and sustainability problems, which affect the long-term results.

Findings from FGDs indicate that 122(30%) of church members accepted that they are beneficiaries of various capital and financial assistance through church-led initiatives. Although this is almost a third of the total population, it justifies the conclusion that some institutions are functioning to enhance their members' economic welfare. Members from this category mentioned being members in various self-help groups, SACCOs, FBO Microfinance organizations and other investment groups. However, the researcher observed that most of these initiatives worked well in urban setup. However, 61(15%) argued that such initiatives cannot work in churches, as most of the leaders of such initiatives are controlled by greed, which leads to financial mismanagement. A study by Faboyede et al. (2022) reported that some churches in Africa have eroded trust for collective resource pulling for poverty alleviation through financial misappropriation. As a result, members opt to trust other financial institutions outside those established as FBOs, leaving church leadership structures with questions to answer. Breakdown in such structures that are mandated to take care of the needs of individuals through supported initiatives points towards a weak institutional functionality among churches.

#### 4.1.3 Community Programs and Projects

Under community programs and projects, the strongest responses were agricultural projects, supported by 20 clerics, representing 83%, and church-owned enterprises, supported by 18 clerics, representing 75%. These findings show that clerics strongly believe churches can directly create economic opportunities through community-based projects. Agricultural projects can improve food security and income, while church-owned enterprises can create employment for members. This reflects Weberian relevance because it shows religion influencing organized economic activity. The church becomes a moral and economic institution that encourages productive work and resource development.

However, health-driven programs were supported by 10 clerics, representing 42%. This moderate response suggests that clerics recognize the link between health and economic empowerment, but not as strongly as agriculture or church enterprises. Poor health can reduce productivity and income, so stronger health programs could improve members' ability to work and participate in economic life. This mirrors findings by O'Neil (2017), who established that churches that are institutionally functional prioritize health and education besides spiritual issues.

The opinion of church members was divided, where 273(67%) opined that their churches did not endeavour any initiative towards healthcare. This was on a higher side, indicating that the beneficiaries of the initiatives did not feel that such initiative was endeavoured by their churches. However, the remaining 135(33%) opined that their churches were doing well on matters of healthcare. For instance, the respondent below gave the experience from his church saying.

*"In this church, we have always benefited from medical services thanks to a partnership with likeminded individuals. I am a beneficiary of a program that deals with health, our church collaborated with a certain NGO from abroad to bring a medical camp after which I ended up together with other five members from this church being beneficiary for the next five years. I am almost 90% towards my recovery journey without spending my own money as the treatment is fully catered for. The role our church plays only writing proposal asking for help, and then the organizations come in with resources,"* (FGD Respondent 4, Personal Communication, 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2025).

The narration points towards the power that institutional functionality has in terms of partnering with other bodies to help navigate societal challenges amidst lack of resources within an institution. The reality in this case is that the church in context, through its leadership structures, deemed it fit to go beyond preaching healing by mouth and

demonstrating it through partnering with NGOs. This implies that the Weberian perspective on economic empowerment should be translated from words to practical actions for economic empowerment to be realized.

Findings from the table above indicate that only 8 (33%) clerics agreed to have their church sponsor schools. From the researcher's observations, the schools established in the context were affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church (2 sampled clerics) and the Friends Church (2 sampled clerics), both registered with the Ministry of Education and run by the government. However, there were two more schools registered as private and operated by two churches from Pentecostal Charismatic movements (Redeemed Gospel Church and Deliverance church). This implies that the two groups that indicated they had schools operated them with a different target.

An important aspect to note in this cases is that, the schools that are run publicly create an opportunity for all groups of kids to go to school, disproving the Marxian argument of social class created by religion. However, privately run schools are for-profit ventures by the church, implying the relevance of Marx's argument that religion is used to create classes. The idea that only well-off parents can afford private school fees locks out the majority of parents who lack the means to pay them.

It is worth saying that some churches were not seen to prioritize education, more so those within the AICs category, as none of the sampled churches sponsored either public or private schools. Generally, the fact that about 70% of clerics failed to acknowledge the existence of a school run by their church indicates that some churches are still far from achieving the capacity to help members fight poverty through educational programs. Throughout the western region, most schools are sponsored by religious organizations, with the majority sponsored by Catholic, Anglican, Friends, and Church of God. Additionally, private schools are sponsored by Pentecostal Charismatic churches, which place financial value on the education services they offer.

Results from the table above indicate that only 6 (25%) clerics reported being affiliated with a university/college/vocational institution. Just as in the case above for schools, 2 clerics were from the Catholic Church, where they mentioned the name of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa and two were from the Anglican Church, who mentioned St. Paul University. Upon conducting a personal investigation, the researcher established that St. Paul University was not owned solely by the Anglican Church but by a group of denominations, including ACK. Institutions of higher learning are known to produce individuals who act as top cream human capital to run healthcare, manufacturing, education, engineering and other important sectors that transform the economy of a nation.

One critical point to note is that residents of the Western region, or church members, do not directly attend universities associated with their churches, as placement is handled by other institutions. However, the fact that such an institution is established under such churches indicates the willingness of such churches to fight illiteracy through providing critical infrastructure that promotes educational programmes. Generally, in Kenya, there are about 68 chartered universities. Of these, 4 universities are located within the area of study, with each county having at least one university. The reason behind universities operating autonomously is that their administration is so complex that Faith-Based leaders would not wish to interfere with.

Findings further reveal that 20 (84%) clerics indicated that their churches were affiliated with a theological college. This was the highest representation of institutions established by churches. The reason for such a high response may be the many remotely operated theological colleges that lack a clear establishment centre. Today, almost every church has its own theological classes, since they are not fully regulated by the government, except those which are fully recognized or accredited. However, it is important to note that mainline churches have well-established theological colleges that train individuals for church service, with most of them recognized or accredited by the government. Most of the satellite theological colleges train all willing members in biblical concepts, with very little focus on economic empowerment. Therefore, such institutions cannot be depended upon to establish an economic foundation for members and church leaders.

During FGDs with church members, 163(40%) of church members expressed understanding on the role of the church on education but questioned whether the church had any power to help raise the standard of education as a way of uplifting economic status of Western region of Kenya. Still on the same, 122(30%) indicated that most schools are aligned to old mainline churches, with Catholic Church being the leading sponsor because they understood that missionary work was not only meant for preaching the gospel but also impacting economic development, hence, working hard to establish schools. One member of Catholic Church opined this, summarizing the opinion of the group:

*"I am a student of history and therefore I can explain something about Catholic Church and development.*

*During the coming of missionaries, they valued education as a tool to impact values, train leaders and convert many to Christianity. This led to colonial government facilitate education by building schools and pumping in resources. As a result, by the time they were leaving, Catholic Church had gained a framework to advance education in Kenya, alongside the Kenyan government. This approach was emulated by other missionaries but did not do as much as what Catholic church did comparatively,"* (FGD Respondent 84, Personal Communication, 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2025)

Just as the respondent in context puts, the Catholic Church took advantage and started many schools. Alongside other missionaries who came to establish historic mainline churches, they established a framework that challenged Africans to get to class and study. However, because of the strong African culture, education has taken time to saturate a larger percentage of society. This explains why 82(20%) of respondents, who were a majority aligned to AICs, seemed to have very little to say about education as a church initiative, insisting on the role of the church as purely spiritual.

#### **4.1.4 Manifestation of Institutional Functionality**

The findings in this study point towards the critical element of institutional functionalism, which call for an understanding of the institution's role and endeavouring avenues to execute the functions. In particular, the church reflects a positive functionalist perspective in areas of livelihood training at 71%, agricultural projects for the community at 83%, church-owned enterprises at 75%, and other indicators above 50%. The activities are ideal in helping members gain necessary life skills and the community, improve food security, increase their income and manage their resources properly. In the long run, the church contributes to both community and individual social welfare, stability and economic empowerment. Furthermore, by encouraging the idea of collective support, the church demonstrates the functional role of peaceful coexistence and shared responsibility. In the long run, the social order is maintained in society and individuals support each other welfare.

However, it is worth noting that even in the face of the functional role of religion, through the discussed success in economic empowerment. Dysfunction is manifested in the weak areas of the table. Low support for connecting members with markets at 17%, marketplace ministry at 17%, digital literacy at 21%, business coaching at 25%, SACCOs at 33%, and youth mentorship at 33% and fewer educational issues show that the church may not be fully preparing members for modern economic realities. This can become dysfunctional because members may receive encouragement to work hard but lack the practical tools, capital, mentorship, knowledge and skills and market access needed to succeed.

Therefore, the findings show both the church's functional and dysfunctional roles. Functionally, the church promotes work, discipline, stewardship, skills, investment, and community projects. Dysfunctionally, it may limit economic transformation if it does not give enough attention to digital literacy, business networking, youth mentorship, market access, and structured financial support. In conclusion, Weberian theory explains how church values shape economic behavior, while functionalism shows how the church can either support social and economic stability or create gaps when some empowerment roles are neglected.

## **V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

While Weber's arguments about the influence of various religious values such as stewardship, hard work, thrift, investment and discipline, the perspective provides only a partial explanation on the nexus between Christianity and economic empowerment. The study demonstrated that economic empowerment should move beyond Weber's doctrinal emphasis toward result-oriented actions to realize economic mobility. The study demonstrates that this is possible given that initiatives taken by some of the churches in context, such as supporting education, healthcare, business and church-based financial initiatives for members, can uplift members' economic status. The study further reveals that institutional capacity determines the direction the church takes in formulating and implementing its economic transformation agenda, with the support of proper governance. In this case, governance determines how resources are mobilized and wisely used, initiatives that are prioritized and evaluation of the practical outcomes to determine areas of improvement.

This study's conclusion, therefore, is that understanding the contribution of Christianity should shift from a doctrinal emphasis, which is only the starting point, to action-oriented practices. Given that economic transformation is shaped by both religious ethics and values and institutional functionality, the church has a task of rising above its operational standards. Consequently, the church should consider refocusing implementation strategies beyond the pulpit, economic principles and practices to practical programmes that improve the economic capacity and welfare of both members and society at large.

### **5.2 Recommendations**

Churches should strengthen their institutional functionality by translating religious values of stewardship, discipline, and responsibility into practical, accountable, and sustainable economic empowerment programmes that enhance members' financial literacy, entrepreneurship capacity, and overall economic wellbeing.

### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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