


# Radical economic approach in Pentecostalism: A Pentecostal response to economic difficulties

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Economies of the African continent have been faced with difficulties in the last decade caused by various factors including coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), unemployment, poverty and so forth. In the South African context, there is another factor that has emerged in the last decade called 'load-shedding' resulting in power cuts that affected the economy of the country. Consequently, many small businesses had cut jobs as they could not afford alternative energy generation such as generators and solar energy. These harsh economic conditions have produced some level of economic difficulties where the economy is not growing because of job losses and other challenges. How do Pentecostals respond to economic difficulties? This article attempts to answer this question through the radical economic approach. This approach is framed as a theory that confronts the conventional economic approaches. In addition, this theory is based on radical giving, radical charities and radical development.

**Contribution:** The radical economic approach is relevant in dealing with economic difficulties; however, its radical giving has the potential to produce some level of exploitation of the poor and the marginalised in some instances. To deal with these exploitations, this article suggests a radical economic approach that will be considerate of the poor and the marginalised in communities by juxtaposing it with radical sociology.

**Keywords:** radical economic approach; Pentecostalism; economic conditions; economic difficulty; economics.

## Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had an impact on trade and development in industries around the world, which resulted in economic difficulties (Bernat & Duda 2023). The impact that the pandemic has had on trade and development cannot be underestimated. Even efforts for economic recovery are slow, given the high impact of the pandemic on trade and development. The pandemic has had an impact on governments, businesses, churches, society and even individuals and their households. Nonetheless, the economy of the world has, in the last few years, tried to recover from the global economic crisis caused by many factors including COVID-19. Some countries in the world have begun to show some signs of economic recovery as industries are opened again in the post-COVID-19 era (Wang, Cui & Chang 2023). In South Africa and elsewhere in Africa, other factors perpetuate the economic difficulties such as the energy crisis and severe power cuts, which result in joblessness and poverty, particularly among the youth (Khobai 2020). South Africans have been placed under economic difficulties as some small businesses had to close operations during these power cuts (Tembe & Hlengwa 2022). Consequently, many middle-class South Africans live through credit and the poor through the help of government grants (cf. Koelble 2022; Webb 2021). It is for the same reason that some South Africans have lost their important assets such as houses and cars because of economic difficulties in the 21st century (Fubah & Moos 2022). Some of the citizens of the country have struggled with attending to basic needs such as providing for their families and taking children to school because of the COVID-19 and energy crisis in the country (Pillay 2021). The energy crisis has produced other pandemics including crime because of power cuts in many areas, which also result in the slow growth of the economy as investors are sceptical to invest in a country with a high rate of crime.

How do Pentecostals in South Africa and elsewhere in the continent respond to the economic difficulties caused by COVID-19, load-shedding, crime and other factors? How do they cope with the rising inflation, cost of debt, high-interest rates, high food prices, high costs of living and other challenges in the country? How do they cope with the challenges of losing important assets in life such as houses? How do they cope with the challenges of losing the main sources

of income such as jobs and business? To answer these questions, this article unpacks the framework of a radical economic approach within the broader Pentecostal movement. This approach is discussed as the theory of radical giving, radical charities and radical development. The approach will also be discussed about how it responds to the economic difficulties in the African context. The contribution of this article is to demonstrate that while the approach is relevant to addressing economic difficulties, it has, in some contexts, produced some level of exploitation of the poor and the marginalised, particularly its aspect of radical giving. This calls for a different approach to radical economic approach that will be considerate of the poor and marginalised in Pentecostal communities. This means that the radical economic approach should be implemented simultaneously with the love and compassion for the poor and marginalised in Pentecostal churches and in society. Radical economic approach should be implemented by recognising the radical sociology of Karl Marx, which values human emancipation in economic growth. The next section will introduce the radical economic approach as a theoretical framework for this article.

### Framing a radical economic approach

The radical economic approach is a theory that seeks to confront the existing and conventional approaches to economics such as capitalism to bring economic change in society. Various theories within the radical economic approach exist for the confrontation of approaches such as capitalism. Among them, for example, is radical sociology, which is a Marxian school of thought that considers human emancipation against the human exploitation of capitalism (Flacks & Turkel 1978). This means that in becoming radical as an economic approach, we cannot ignore the human element whereby human beings seek to be empowered within the economic growth. The radical economic approach, particularly the Marxian radical sociology's approach to economics, is suitable for addressing the economic inequalities that exist in many economies of the world. This approach is also relevant for addressing various immoral activities of capitalism in the economies of the world. Sayer (2000:89) explains that 'The immorality of capitalism lies substantially in the fact that once our means of existence is dependent on market forces, the latter tend to trump considerations of the good'. Therefore, the radical economic approach comes in as contrast to the capitalist approach to economy where human emancipation is given credence as opposed to the exploitation of the working class and the poor. In radical economic theory, the people are activated in the process of production and the economic growth through empowerment in which they become part of the decision making in organisation and companies. In the context of this article, it means they become active in the process that leads to the decisions within the church setting. In the end, the radical economic theory is a participatory process in which the people take part in the economy.

In the South African context, there have been various economic approaches that exist such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) and Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA). Cameron (1996:183) explains that 'The RDP is an integrated, coherent socio-economic framework. It attempts to integrate development, reconstruction, redistribution and reconciliation into a unified programme. The programme will attempt to meet basic needs'. Growth, Employment and Redistribution, according to Le Roux (1997:45), was aimed at addressing the basic needs of the people in South Africa and the human resources and also implementing RDP. Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa was introduced, according to Moyo and Mamabolo (2014:946), to deal with the challenges of poverty and reduce unemployment rates by increasing the gross domestic product. However, these economic approaches did not see the light of the day in the democratic era in South Africa because of the immorality of capitalism as discussed above. A radical economic approach seeks to challenge these existing economic approaches to bring change to the economic conditions. North (1995:31) cf. Thornton (2016) explains that:

Radical economics refers to the work and ideas of political economists who take a left-wing perspective on the discipline of economics. It denotes a sharp departure from conventional, orthodox interpretations of reality. (p. 31)

However, radical economics is not only the approach taken in the political context; the ecclesiastical context can also take such an approach to economics. In the context of the Pentecostal and charismatic churches, it is an approach that seeks to bring an alternative economy that confronts the capitalist and neo-liberal approaches that have exploited the people of God. However, I am not suggesting that the radical economic approach is a holy cow, but pointing to its potential to dismantle oppressive forms of economic approaches, particularly if applied and implemented together with the radical sociology of Marxian approach to economics.

In opposing the current economic approaches in their contexts, Pentecostals use the radical economic approach not necessarily through political influence but an ecclesiastical influence. This means that they do not follow the conventional forms of economics in their churches, but seek to confront them to bring change. It is for this reason that the Pentecostal church builds an alternative economy that is very different from the existing economies in the world. In this article, the radical economic approach is used in three ways: radical giving, radical charities and radical development. Radical giving refers to how Pentecostals approach the concept of giving tithes and offerings, which is different from other Christian traditions. However, at times, this radical giving is exploited by some pastors with capitalist tendency where believers give, but it is only the pastor receiving the blessings. Radical charities refer to the philanthropic work that many of the Pentecostal churches in Africa participate in to confront conventional economic approaches. The radical development

is discussed here in the context of various projects that Pentecostal churches engage in to bring change in their communities. In the next section, the article explores these three levels of radical economic approach within the context of Pentecostalism.

### Radical economic approach within Pentecostalism

The first aspect of the radical economic approach among Pentecostal and charismatic churches is giving. Pentecostals employ radical giving, which is also part of the prosperity gospel. According to Coleman (2011):

In an important way, the whole point of giving to a God-led ministry is to vacate the commercial economy and to enter another realm, a Christ-centred gospel, or sacrificial, economy in which material expectations are transformed. (p. 36)

This happens during a Pentecostal liturgy whereby in some churches, the congregants are sometimes asked to give more than two times in different kinds of offerings. According to Mbe (2002), pastors would dedicate a time during Pentecostal liturgy to teach the congregants about giving. Pentecostal churches are known for the giving of tithes and offerings, which is radically applied as compared to other Christian traditions. In Pentecostal churches, people also give to different projects such as buildings, mission work, conferences and so forth (Onyinah 2020). Benyah (2018) explains that giving takes a radical form among Pentecostals in Africa because Africans are already used to giving to religious authorities within the African traditional religious worldview. In other words, when visiting a witch doctor or a traditional healer, for example, a patient is required to bring some form of an offering to the same. Hence, even in churches, the practice of giving various types of offerings is done in the same practice of honouring a spiritual authority. Furthermore, Pentecostals believe in giving because it serves as a contribution to the kingdom of God, which is in the present and the future expectation of the coming of Jesus (Akoko 2007). In this way, giving among Pentecostal and charismatic churches is taken positively as believers want to contribute towards the kingdom and the development of their communities (Frahm-Arp 2018).

Pentecostals are strong on the concept of giving because they perceive God as a giver (Orogun 2022). The common biblical text among Pentecostals is John 3:16 'For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life'. This is used to motivate Pentecostal believers that as much as God is a giver, they too must become givers. Therefore, the one who gives in the church is perceived as taking after the similitude of God. As Pentecostals have respect and love for their God, they value the importance of giving in their churches. It is for the same reasons that Pentecostals also give directly to their man or woman of God as they perceive them as representatives of their God. In churches such as the Enlightened Christian Gathering of Shepherd Bushiri, the congregants would carry money to give to their prophet to receive prayers and

blessings (cf. Kgatle 2022; Ramantswana 2018). In addition, the same biblical text would be used to encourage the congregants to give their last money in the same way God gave his only begotten son, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Pentecostals also appreciate life as a God-given gift and to give is to be grateful and appreciative of the same.

The second aspect of the radical economic approach among Pentecostals is radical charities. Some of the pastors in Pentecostal and charismatic churches are involved in charity work. Pentecostal churches in Africa are involved in humanitarian and charity work which they do during times of crisis (Freeman 2012). According to Akanbi and Beyers (2017:6), in some of the Pentecostal churches, 'Profits from the projects are used to assist the members who are in difficulties and to carry out charitable work among the poor and needy of the society'. In many Pentecostal churches, there will be a session or service dedicated to charities. Charity works among the Pentecostal and charismatic churches also include the giving of bursaries to students who might be struggling with the payment of fees (Gukurume 2020). In addition, Pentecostals have responded to many crises in history by giving out relief in the form of money, food parcels and so forth. During the hard lockdown of the COVID-19 in South Africa, pastors such as Prophet Shepherd Bushiri of the Enlightened Christian Gathering distributed food parcels among the poor communities (Kgatle 2020b). Bushiri is not alone in charity projects; many other Pentecostal pastors in South Africa have responded to other crises such as the floods that made many Durban residents homeless. The late Prophet TB Joshua was also known for many charity works in response to economic difficulties in Nigeria and other parts of the world.

The last aspect of the radical economic approach among Pentecostals is development. Some of the Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa are involved in community development. According to Freeman (2012), the issue of development is defined by Pentecostals as something that God desires for the Africans. Wariboko (2012:35) adds that Pentecostals 'believe that the conquering of poverty and acceleration of economic development will be important for the flourishing of humanity in Africa'. As God desires prosperity for his people in Africa, some Pentecostal pastors then became involved in the projects of development. Development among Pentecostals is first done at a personal level as individuals are taught the same message of the prosperity of God's people. The development also moves from the individual level towards the development of communities and structural development (Kgatle 2020a). Instead of relying much on the state to develop the communities, Pentecostals take it to themselves to be involved in the development of the same. According to Kakwata (2017), this is an important contribution by the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, as many countries in Africa remain underdeveloped. The challenges of development in the global north are not the same in the global south; hence Pentecostalism has found resonance in

an underdeveloped context. Therefore, Pentecostals take it to themselves to initiate projects that seek to encourage development among the African people.

In many African countries where the state is very slow in the issues of development, Pentecostal churches become more popular as churches that get involved in development, thus creating an alternative economy. Ukah (2020) explains that:

Pentecostalism has generated socioeconomic development, social trust, and institutions in parts of Africa where churches and religious nongovernmental organizations claim to operate social infrastructures such as schools, orphanages, hospitals, and vocation centers. (p. 441)

White (2020:472) adds other ways such as 'giving donations to deprived communities, health institutions, and especially developing the human capital of farmers in the deprived communities'. So, the Pentecostal and charismatic churches in West Africa in countries such as Nigeria and Ghana are involved in the development projects (cf. Adeboye 2020; Adedibu 2020). In this way, development is not just theoretical, but it is seen by actual projects initiated and completed by Pentecostal churches. In addition, this kind of development is not only relevant to the churches but also to the nation (Akanbi & Beyers 2017). Mbe (2002) reiterates the point that development in Pentecostal and charismatic churches takes place from both the individual level and the infrastructural level. These initiatives taken by the Pentecostal and charismatic churches further make these churches popular in African societies as people can see that they are involved in good deeds of development (Benyah 2018).

### Radical economic approach and economic difficulties

The radical economic approach has the potential to deal with economic difficulties in times such as COVID-19. When pastors are involved in charity work, they are in a way involved in addressing the harsh realities of economic depression. In addition, the building of schools, clinics, universities, banks and other projects is done to bring out change in communities and to address the difficulties that exist among community members (Akanbi & Beyers 2017). The involvement of many Pentecostal pastors in charity works also demonstrates a concern for addressing the economic difficulties that exist in African communities. In addition, Pentecostals take it upon themselves to address the socio-economic crisis that exists as a result of unemployment, poverty and inequalities. Pentecostal and charismatic churches take part in preparing the young people for the workplace. They do this by providing various skills to the youth such as computer, communication, personal and other skills. Pentecostal and charismatic churches also employ the youth to work in their churches as secretaries, musicians and so forth. In this way, a radical economic approach is important in Pentecostalism in responding to economic difficulties as they arise in the African context.

There is also a link between the emergence and the expansion of Pentecostalism with the economic crisis in the world (Freeman 2012). Early Pentecostalism emerged at the beginning of the 20th century during the economic crisis. Similarly, neo-Pentecostalism emerged during the economic crisis in the last quarter of the 20th century. There is, therefore, a link between the emergence of 21st-century Pentecostalism and the economic difficulties in Africa. Ukah (2020) points out that most Pentecostal churches in Africa were founded during the economic crisis and in response to the same. Obadare (2022:105) speaks of 'Pentecostalism's emergence being coeval with an economic crisis that put matters of poverty and prosperity front and center in ordinary people's lives'. It is for this reason that the Pentecostal approach to economics can deal with economic difficulties. Therefore, an economic crisis is more of an opportunity for the emergence and expansion of the Pentecostal movement. This also explains its growth in the global south and developing countries as opposed to the developed countries. It is for the same reason that Pentecostalism grows among the poor and the marginalised rather than the wealthy.

Lastly, it is important to point out that the Pentecostal and charismatic churches can deal with the crisis because of the message they preach to their congregants. Mbe (2002:361) explains that 'the specific content of their economic message, which makes them better able to deal with the present crisis compared to the mainline Churches and the government'. In a way, Pentecostal churches have a way to assist their members who are facing difficult situations in their lives (Taru 2020). This means that when faced with an economic crisis, Pentecostal preachers offer words of encouragement in their message for the Pentecostals not to stay in the same crisis. Therefore, the economic message of the Pentecostal preacher is more likely to take the believer away from the dire state of economic difficulty. Hence, Pentecostal pastors do not preach to only fulfil a liturgical obligation but rather preach to bring transformation in the life of the believer. The transformative message has the potential to address the economic difficulties that Pentecostal believers in Africa face in their daily lives.

### The poor and the marginalised in radical economic approach

The challenge of the radical economic approach, particularly its radical giving is that it sometimes takes from the very poor people that need empowerment. When Pentecostals use the approach of radical giving by taking from the vulnerable including the elderly, then this approach becomes very much exploitative. Benyah (2018) explains that radical giving becomes exploitative when the poor and the marginalised are encouraged to give for the sponsorship of the lavish lifestyle of the flamboyant and self-styled church leaders in Africa. In other words, when it is the money of the poor and the marginalised sponsoring the pastor or prophet's lifestyle, then it becomes very problematic and exploitative. The reason for this assertion is that many pastors in Pentecostal

and charismatic churches in Africa are very much prosperous, living in mansions and driving big cars while the majority of their congregants are living in poverty. At times, some congregants are even encouraged to go and borrow so that they can have an offering to give in church. This again disadvantages those who are materially poor in the Pentecostal and charismatic congregations. This makes the poor congregants get poorer and the rich pastors get richer within the Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa (Mbe 2002).

It is also important to point out that radical giving is exploitative when the pastor requests offerings from the congregants when they are faced with difficult economic situations. Many people were surprised when Prophet Shepherd Bushiri asked his congregants to pay their tithes and offerings just after the announcement of the lockdown during COVID-19 in South Africa (cf. Frahm-Arp 2020; Mzondi 2021). The challenge was not necessarily on the giving of tithes and offerings, but on the timing at which people were asked to give their tithes and offerings. During the COVID-19 hard lockdown in South Africa, the majority of congregants were vulnerable to being able to pay their tithes and offerings. In addition and as highlighted in the introduction, many of them could not manage to pay their tithes because of the loss of jobs and businesses. It is, therefore, very insensitive of a pastor to request the tithes and the offerings when people are faced with various challenges. In this way, the radical economic approach, particularly its radical giving becomes very exploitative. This calls for the radical economic approach that needs to be considerate of the poor and the marginalised as discussed in the next section.

### **Reimagining a radical economic approach: A need to include radical sociology**

To address the exploitations of the radical economic approach, there is a need for consideration of the plight of the poor people in communities. This calls for the juxtaposition of the radical sociology within the radical economic approach to deal with the plight of the people. This means that a Pentecostal church should not only do charities to the poor but must be the church of the poor, meaning to minister to them regularly rather than on charity occasions. This means that the Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa should regard the challenges of the poor and not ignore them. Therefore, these churches are expected to take an important interest in the betterment of the people in Africa as activated participants in the processes of the church economy. In addition, the Pentecostal and charismatic churches are expected to become an alternative economy that will deal with economic challenges among the poor people in Africa. This is possible when radical giving does not take from the poor in communities but seeks to empower them through various projects. This is heeding to the call by the Marxian theory of radical sociology where the people are prioritised to the economic growth and where people are valued as opposed to their exploitation. This is possible when the poor, including the elderly are not asked to give their last penny in

the quest to enrich the pastor. It is also possible when the poor people in Pentecostal and charismatic churches are not used by pastors to raise money through international funders.

The poor people in the church should not be compelled to give beyond their means. Any giver in the church setting is required to give according to their own measure not to be pushed beyond their limit. The church should not propagate the inequalities that exist in the world, which are exploitative to the poor people. The Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are expected to be different regarding how they treat the poor people in communities. The difference is not only made through charities but by also avoiding the exploitation of poor people, especially the elderly. Giving should be voluntary, not compulsory as stated in 2 Corinthians 9:7 that God loves a cheerful giver. This means that giving should be done through a willing heart, not through compulsion. In addition, the believers should be allowed to give according to the measure of the grace they have. This means that a poor person cannot give what they do not have. Otherwise, this will demand that the poor person goes out of their way to fulfil the giving obligation in their church. In some Pentecostal and charismatic churches, people are expected to even borrow in order to give to their church or pastor. Hence, the majority of the poor people in Pentecostal and charismatic churches end up in debt.

The poor people should be transformed by the same radical economic approach instead of oppressing them. Again, this speaks to the relevancy of the radical sociology as an approach to economics without the oppression of the poor and the working class. In other words, the Pentecostal message should move the poor from their abject poverty into empowerment. This might mean taking the children of the poor to school, building houses for the poor and investing in their well-being. This article acknowledges that some of the Pentecostal churches are already doing this, but it does not have to be an occasional charitable work but something done consistently. In the end, the poor in these churches would not feel sidelined by the rich, and the gap that exists between the two would be narrower. This can be done also by ensuring that the rich share their wealth with the poor in communities and churches to bring that balance between the two extremes. This is what the early church of the apostles did. They sold possessions to meet the needs of the poor people in their communities. This should be the same approach in Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa whereby the rich also become active participants in taking care of the poor in communities to build one unified society. This is only possible when the radical economic approach is applied together with the radical sociology in acknowledging the role played by people in the economy.

The radical sociology in the radical economic approach is also consistent with the message of Christ and his call for the empowerment of the people. The message of Christ is not the oppression and exploitation of the poor, but the empowerment of the poor. In Luke 4:18, Christ says:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed.

Christ also called for the release of the prisoners and the liberty of all those who are oppressed. This means that even the mission of Christ is for the transformation of the poor people in communities, not the oppression of the same. The gospel is a powerful force that can transform the lives of the poor by bringing the good news to them. However, in the quest to address issues of poverty in Africa, the ministry of the gospel should not only be in words but also in action. This is what Jesus did during his ministry. He did not only preach to the poor but also ministered to their needs. Therefore, radical economic approaches in the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches should be able to embrace the message of Christ about the poor. However, the current practice of forcing believers to give even when they are not able to do so is in continuity with the capitalist approach that seeks to maximise profits.

## Conclusion

This article looked at the economic difficulties in the South African context and elsewhere in the continent as caused by COVID-19 and other economic conditions such as load shedding and high rates of joblessness. In addition, the article looked at how the Pentecostal movement has been responding to economic difficulties. Pentecostals use the radical economic approach in responding to an economic crisis and in dealing with harsh economic realities in the life of the believers. This kind of approach is premised on radical giving, radical charities and radical development. However, the challenge is that a radical economic approach sometimes produces some form of exploitation, particularly among the poor and the marginalised in communities. In this way, it leans towards immoral capitalism that seeks the exploitation of the poor and the working class. In other words, the radical economic approach is exploitative when the poor are asked to give what they do not have in their lives. The radical economic approach is exploitative when the old grannies are asked to give their grants to sponsor the lavish lifestyle of the pastor. To correct the exploitations, this article suggests that the radical economic approach should be considerate of the poor and the marginalised in communities. This is possible when the radical economic approach is implemented together with the radical sociology that seeks the empowerment of the people as opposed to their exploitation. This changes how we study the economics of the Pentecostal movement; the concept of a radical economic approach should be evaluated in the context of the poor and the marginalised.

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## Author's contributions

M.S.K is the sole author of this research article.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

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