

The Socio-Ethical Principle of Subsidiarity: A Philosophical Appraisal of Its Relevance in the Contemporary World

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Abstract

This paper is a critical exposition of the socio-ethical principle of subsidiarity with a view to establishing its continued ethical, socio-political and economic viability in the contemporary world. The paper is prompted by the fact that the human society in its search for catalysts to propel its development and wellbeing is a victim of the propagation and application of many faulty theories and principles that offer only limited solutions both in scope and time. Employing the critical expository method the paper reviews the historical origin of this principle, its political and socio-ethical dimensions, its scope of application, its difference from other related principles as well as its effects and relevance in the present day world. In appraising the value of subsidiarity the paper presents it as a principle which advocates the recognition and employment of the freedom, creativity and industry of the individual and lesser social entities by the higher authorities for the accomplishment of the common good. In conclusion the paper holds that subsidiarity is not an outdated principle but a very potent one which is highly recommended for socio-political and economic development.

Keywords: Subsidiarity, Socio-ethical principle, Philosophical appraisal, Relevance, Contemporary world.

1. Introduction

The transition from the uncivilized primitive world to the civilized modern world is an effect of the ideas, theories and principles propounded by philosophers and scientists in the socio-political, economic and scientific fields of study. These theories are stimulants of social change and progress and have greatly influenced the restructuring and reorganization of the *modus operandi* of the societal life of many nations and social groups. To effect a smooth running of the socio-political and economic life of the society, myriads of systems, theories and principles of administration and governance have been advanced. These include liberalization, centralization, socialism, communism, devolution of power, decentralization, bureaucratization, solidarity, federalism etc. Some of these theories or principles, though of great value, have limited relevance either in scope or period. There are also some theories and principles of social philosophy that have lasting relevance both in scope and time, among such principles is the socio-ethical principle of subsidiarity which this paper wishes to appraise with regard to its relevance in the contemporary world. Subsidiarity is a principle of social organization that favours the localization of societal problem-solving with the duty to ensure that individuals and smaller social organizations are well equipped to participate fully in collective decision-making as well as its implementation regarding issues that affect them and their communities.

As a principle, subsidiarity holds that nothing should be done by a higher and more complex organization which can be done as well by a lower and simpler organization. Hence any project which can be conveniently carried out successfully by a more decentralized social organization should not be hijacked by a higher or more centralized body. The principle advocates the attitude of assistance or help from the higher authorities towards the individual or lesser social organization rather than that of usurping their functions and subsuming or substituting them. The concern of this paper is to establish that this principle is not an outdated social principle but a principle which is still very relevant in the contemporary world where over-centralization of resources and authority appear to be suppressing the creativity and initiatives of individuals and smaller organizations thereby promoting bureaucratic bottlenecks, inefficiency, redundancy and developmental stagnation. The paper employing a critical expository method presents an overview of this principles and then argues that it is both a social and an ethical principle which constitutes an essential doctrine in Catholic social teachings. In arguing for its relevance the paper shows the presence of this principle in the constitution and charter of some nations and major political unions. Furthermore the paper distinguishes subsidiarity from other social principles such as federalism, socialism, liberalism, decentralization, devolution of power and solidarity. The paper also discussed the relevance of this principle in the contemporary world by arguing for its benefits and positive effects. Appraising the principle the paper presents it as a two-sided coin which must be embraced both from its positive and negative dimensions. In conclusion, the paper recommends its adoption both in governmental and non-governmental organizations to advance political and socio-economic development.

2. Understanding the Principle of Subsidiarity

Etymologically the concept subsidiarity is derived from the Latin words *subsidio* (to aid, to help or assist), *subsidiū* and *subsidiarius* (aid, assistance or subsidy) which entail assistance or support given to a less privileged person or organization. As a socio-ethical principle it is one of the most crucial social doctrines of the Roman Catholic social teachings firstly propounded in the encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII *Rerum Novarum* (1892) and later developed in the writings of the German theologian Oswald Von Nell-Breuning whose work influenced the social teachings of Pope Pius XI in his encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931).

One of the most emphatic statements made about subsidiarity as a most important principle of social philosophy was made by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* where he stated that “Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organization can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social and never destroy and absorb them”. (1931: 203). The principle advocates that the state or superior social order must adopt attitudes of help, (*subsidiū*), support, promotion, and development with respect to lower-order or inferior social organization (Pontifical Council, 2005: 101). As a basic principle of social philosophy subsidiarity holds that decisions with regard to the common good should take place at the lowest level possible and the highest level necessary. According to this principle, the state, government or higher authorities should not embark on any task or project which can be effectively carried out by individuals or smaller and simpler organizations. Complex social entities should not usurp the duties that smaller social groups can as well perform. Individuals or lesser organizations should not be absorbed by larger authorities but supported or assisted by them to perform tasks within their ability. The subsidiarity principle, according to David Bosnich (1996: 1) is “a bulwark of limited government and personal freedom. It conflicts with the passion for centralization and bureaucracy characteristic of a welfare state”. Based on the autonomy and dignity of the human person, subsidiarity holds that the various strata of the society, from the family to the state and the international order, should be at the service of the human person. Rightly holding that these persons are by their nature social beings, subsidiarity emphasizes the importance of small and intermediate sized social groups and institutions such as the family, town unions, labour unions, religious bodies and other voluntary organizations as mediating structures that empower individual action and link the individual to society as a whole.

Subsidiarity is a very crucial principle because it has application in every aspect of socio-political, moral and economic life. Subsidiarity, according to Meghan Clark (2012: 1), “is an effort at balancing the many necessary levels of society, at its best, the principle navigates the allocation of resources by higher levels of society to support engagement and decision-making by the lower levels” (www.catholicmoraltheology.com/subsidiarity). Hence subsidiarity applies to every human institution including the federal, state and local authorities. When the federal government usurps the rights and responsibilities of the state and local government, a flagrant violation of the principle of subsidiarity has occurred, likewise when the government at any level usurp the rights and responsibilities of lesser social organizations such as town unions, labour unions, economic organizations, health and educational institutions and other non-governmental and voluntary organizations the principle of subsidiarity is violated. The violation of the principle of subsidiarity common when upper echelon bureaucrats operate in a top-down manner denying space to their subordinates breeds inefficiency, redundancy and stagnation.

The principle of subsidiarity insists that intermediate social entities (communities, town unions, institutions, labour unions, voluntary organizations etc.) should be supported or encouraged to perform the functions within their sphere without being required to hand them over unjustly to other social entities of a higher order, by which they would end up being absorbed and substituted. This is because such substitution will bring about a denial of their dignity and essentials place. Hence in as much as subsidiarity positively understood entails the economic and institutional assistance offered to lesser social entities (subsidy, aid etc.), it also has some negative implications which requires the state or higher level social entities to refrain from anything that would restrict, stifle or supplant the initiative, freedom and responsibility of smaller essential cells of the society.

As has been indicated above, the principle of subsidiarity protects individuals and intermediate socio-economic organizations from abuses by higher level social and political authorities and implores these same authorities to assist individuals and intermediate groups to fulfill their potentialities. This principle is imperative because every individual, family and intermediate group has something original to offer to the society at large. It must be acknowledge that an absent or insufficient recognition of the private initiatives and creativity as well as the contribution of organized groups and the failure to recognize their functions, contribute to the undermining of the principle of subsidiarity, just as monopolies and centralization do.

The principle of subsidiarity is strongly opposed to the centralizing impulse which afflicts modern day governments. In accord with subsidiarity, true democracy is a product of local institutions and self-reliance. Subsidiarity frowns at a highly centralized social system which intends to do virtually everything for the individual and intermediate social entities, reducing them to mere recipients and never contributors of social goods. This principle rejects a system that wants to unilaterally guide the individual and lesser groups in all their affairs. A system that, if possible, wants to think for them and even spare them the trouble of living. Where subsidiarity is rejected, citizens are kept in perpetual childhood. Since the fundamental goal of all social activities is the common good, subsidiarity in respecting personal dignity recognizes in every individual or social group an entity that is always capable of contributing to the common good. The government or higher level social organizations are also accorded the responsibility of creating the enabling condition for human flourishing through their constant assistance.

3. Subsidiarity as a Political and Socio-Ethical Principle

The principle of subsidiarity is a socio-political principle of administration with an ethical dimension. Subsidiarity in seeking the promotion of the dignity and wellbeing of the human person insists in recognizing the place of the family, groups, associations and indeed all aggregate social, economic, cultural, political and professional associations to which people belong in their desire for effective social growth. Based on the autonomy and dignity of the individual, subsidiarity believes that each person or group of persons should be given the space to do everything for themselves which they are capable of doing. But since there are things the individual or smaller groups cannot accomplish unaided by a higher social entity, in these matters he must be assisted, he must be subsidized by the social or political institution above him to do those things. As a socio-political principle subsidiarity emphasizes the importance of small and intermediate sized social groups and institutions such as the family, labour unions, local authorities, town unions, professional associations, religious bodies and voluntary agencies as mediating structures in facilitating the growth of the society and provision of the common good.

As an ethical principle subsidiarity states that one should not withdraw from individuals or smaller entities and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry and that “it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order to transfer to the large and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies.” According to this principle, when individuals or small social groups cannot perform necessary functions, the assistance of higher authorities (*subsidium*) is not only permitted but is obligatory. This intervention or assistance must be diligently limited so as not to “destroy or absorb” the lesser body (*Quadragesimo Anno*: 79).

As an ethical principle subsidiarity makes it obligatory for the government or larger social entities to assist individuals or smaller social groups to accomplish tasks within their sphere of operation and also considers it as morally reprehensible for the government or higher authorities to suppress or absorb the smaller social entities by embarking on tasks and projects which can be effectively carried out by them. The duty of the higher organized social groups (federal, state or local governments as well as bigger groups) is to support the individual or small organizations in their bid to provide for the common good.

4. The Principle of Subsidiarity in Catholic Social Teachings

It is an undisputed fact that the principle of subsidiarity as a fundamental principle of social philosophy has its roots in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church (Ranjault 1992: 49) from where the Latin word *subsidiarius* was derived. This principle was first formally articulated in the encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII *Rerum Novarum* (1891) which attempted to articulate a middle course between laissez-faire capitalism and the various forms of communism which subordinate the individual, the family and lesser social entities to the state. This principle was further developed in subsequent Catholic social teachings such as Pope Pius XI's encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Pacem in Terris* of Pope John XXIII, Vatican II documents *Dignitatis Humane* and *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, *Centessimus Annus*, Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*, *Caritas in Veritate* and Pope Francis' *Lumen Fidei* and *Laudato Si*. In developing the principle of subsidiarity Pope Pius XI in his encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) insists that the government should only undertake those initiatives which exceed the capacity of individuals or private groups acting independently. He opines that functions of government and other secular activities should be localized as much as possible.

According to Vischer (2001:108-109), this fundamental tenet of Catholic social teaching was created to describe an approach to the problems of modern society that reflected “a broad understanding of human nature, government and social structures”. He further holds that this doctrine was explicitly anti-communist and was put

forward as an alternative to principles of “solidarity and collectivism” (Vischer 2001:110).

The principal concern of Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* is the common good and in particular with both the growing power of the state and an increasing individualism. He raised alarm that the world will degenerate into a social order in which there are individuals and state with no intermediary communities, institutions or levels. He was emphatic in condemning a social setting that excludes subsidiarity. He stated: “Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiatives and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same-time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organization can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social; and never destroy and absorb them” (1931: 203).

Pope Pius XI was out to promote and protect that richness, creativity and diversity of human society which is under threat by over-centralization.

To further corroborate the importance of subsidiarity, Pope John XXIII in his encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra* (1961: 54) frames it within the context of scientific advancement and cooperation in society. According to him: “The present advance in scientific knowledge and productive technology clearly puts it within the power of the public authority to a much greater degree than ever before to reduce imbalance which may exist between different branches of the economy or between different regions within the same country or even between different peoples of the world. It also puts into the hands of public authority a greater means for limiting fluctuations in the economy and for providing effective measures to prevent the recurrence of mass unemployment. Hence the insistent demands on those in authority... to increase the degree and scope of their activities in the economic sphere, and to devise ways and means and set the necessary machinery in motion for the attainment of this end”. From the foregoing it can be said that the principle of subsidiarity is concerned with a well-ordered society directed towards the common good and this requires the state, individuals, institutions, civil organizations, religious bodies etc., to work together in civil society. Pope John XXIII in the same encyclical did say that “both sides must work together in harmony and their respective efforts must be proportional to the needs of the common good in the prevailing circumstances and conditions of human life” (56). Principle of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching demands respect for the diverse social entities that constitutes the civil society both vertically and horizontally. Hence respect and support should be shown the individual, the family, the community, higher organized social groups, the local government, the state and the federal governments. Attention should also be paid to geographical locations, cultural diversities, ethnic and religious differences and needs.

Catholic social teachings on subsidiarity does not conceive government or higher social organizations simply as a necessary evil, it also conceives government as having a positive role in the society.

Pope John XXIII in another encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963: 63) holds that “it is also demanded by the common good that civil authorities should make earnest efforts to bring about a situation in which individual citizens can easily exercise their rights and fulfil their duties as well. For experience has taught us that, unless these authorities take suitable action with regard to economic, political and cultural matters, inequalities between citizens tend to become more and more widespread, especially in the modern world, and as a result human rights are rendered totally ineffective and the fulfillment of duties is compromised”.

According to Meghan Clark (2012: 1) “Catholic social teaching’s principle of subsidiarity actually includes within it a strong sense of the responsibility of the government for creating the conditions of human flourishing”. With the common good as its chief concern, subsidiarity principle enjoins the government and higher social organization to provide the enabling environment and support the individual and small social entities to exercise their duties and responsibilities in the provision of the common good.

This principle according to David Bosnich (1996: 1) is the “bulwark of limited government and personal freedom” which conflicts with the passion for centralization and bureaucracy which are the defining factors of welfare states. Hence Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991: 48) confronted the “social assistance state” when he wrote that the welfare state was contradicting the principle of subsidiarity by intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility. This according to the pontiff “leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by an enormous increase in spending.

In recommending the principle of subsidiarity Pope Benedict XVI linked it with another social doctrine solidarity: In his encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* he emphasized that “subsidiarity respects personal dignity by recognizing in the person a subject who is always capable of giving something to others”.

It follows that since every individual, family as well as small organizations have something unique to contribute towards the growth of the society, it becomes obligatory for the government or larger organizations to actively promote necessary conditions to support these small entities. The government should not always respond with a fire brigade approach of intervening in drastic conditions. It should be abreast with its responsibility to create the necessary enabling environment for human flourishing.

The Catholic social teachings on subsidiarity, according to Meghan Clark (2012: 1), is a “two-sided coin”. The state has the obligation “to respect and promote the many levels of society.” Hence it has the right and responsibility to intervene where and only when necessary. Government programmes must be evaluated for their effectiveness and necessity to the common man. Those that allocate necessary resources to support communities, families and lower levels of society are in tune with the principle of subsidiarity. In accessing or appraising government programmes, the question must be asked: does it protect and promote our multi-layered civil society? Does it protect and promote human flourishing and common good? Government programmes that fail this test, according Catholic social teachings, have failed the subsidiarity test.

5. The Scope and Application of Subsidiarity as a Socio-Political Principle of Governance

The principle subsidiarity has been widely adopted in the constitutions and charter of many nations as well as international communities and it applies to all human institutions including the state. Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic study, *Democracy in America* is regarded as an examination of the operation of the principle of subsidiarity in the early 19th century America. According to Huffman (cited in Vischer 2001: 123) subsidiarity has been regarded as representing “an aspect of the original theory of American Federalism which held that state governments will be more responsible than the national governments to the public will (and) better informed about local circumstances.” Thus the principle of subsidiarity is a binding force which is at the heart of the American constitution. Hence David Bosnich (1996: 1) asserts that “any extended discussion of the principle of subsidiarity which neglects to consider the respective roles of the states and federal government in American system is radically flawed.” The constitution of the United States was designed to leave many issues of great importance in the hands of the states while the federal government was to do only those things which the individual states could not effectively do for themselves.

Echoing the indispensability of the principle of subsidiarity beyond the spheres of the state and federal government to other institutions, the US conservative author Reid Buckley (2008:177) says: “Will American people never learn that, as a people, to expect swift response and efficiency from government is fatuous? Will we never heed the principle of subsidiarity (in which our fathers were bred), namely that no public agency should do what a private agency can do better and that no higher level public agency should attempt to do what a lower level agency can do better – that to the degree the principle of subsidiarity is violated, first the local government, the state government and the federal government wax in inefficiency...” He further argues that the more power and resources are concentrated on the government the less it discharge its primary responsibilities.

It is not only the United States that has subsidiarity at the heart of its federalism, many nations, institutions and international communities base their co-existence on the principle of subsidiarity. It is pertinent to note that subsidiarity is the general principle of European Union law. The principle was established during the 7th February, 1992 Treaty of Maastricht which came into force on 1st November, 1993. In Article 5 (3) of the Treaty of EU (consolidated version following the Treaty of Lisbon, which came into force on 1st December, 2009) it is stated: “under the principle of subsidiarity, in areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence, the union shall act only if and in so far as the objective of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States, either at central level or at regional and local level, but can rather, be better achieved at union level” (Dinah 2003:153).

The purpose of the principle of subsidiarity adopted by the European Union according to Markus Nyman is to ensure that decisions are taken as close as possible to the people they affect and that action is taken at the level where it is most effective. The subsidiarity principle also ensures that constant checks are made as to whether action at community level is justified, in the light of the possibilities available at national, regional or local level. It is the principle whereby the EU refrains from taking action, except in the areas which fall within its exclusive competence, unless it is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local level. Though not strictly complied with the subsidiarity principle is very much praised by EU institutions and its great importance is

highlighted and strengthened in the EU constitutions. Hence by widening the scope of subsidiarity in the second penultimate recital of the preamble of the Maastricht Treaty, i.e. that “decision are taken as closely as possible to the citizen”, its application was extended to the relationship between society and state just as it concerns relationship between Community and Member States.

The 1999 report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on decentralization recognized subsidiarity as a very important principle. According to this report. “Decentralization or decentralizing governance refers to the restructuring or reorganization of authority so that there is a system of co-responsibility between institutions of governance at the central, regional and local levels according to the principle of subsidiarity, thus increasing the overall quality of effectiveness of the system of governance while increasing the authority and capacities of Sub-national levels”.

It has become in vogue in the past few decades to incorporate the principle of subsidiarity into the political, economic and public administration understandings of decentralization. Kim (2008; 11) fuses the normative principle with existing decentralization theory and synthesizes this as federalism. According to him; “the subsidiary principle and decentralization in federalism should produce the optimal allocation of resources and consequently maximize welfare”. On the same note Fenna and Hollander (2013:221) in the Australian Context point to the fusion of subsidiarity and decentralization as granting federalism a stronger value and normative base. According to them: “subsidiarity is a normative concept, one expressing the view that governance arrangement ought to be organized in as thoroughly devolved a manner as possible. This is the principle that underlies the principle of federalism and it is justified on the basis of values that federalism helps preserve or what benefit it can deliver”

When one considers subsidiarity as a principle for governance Vischer (2001: 128-142) outlines some issues that must be considered among which are: “there must be a recognition of the mediating structures as well as their empowerment. Hence, attention must be paid to the government (central authority), the individual and the mediating structures which constitute the bulwark against government authority. Secondly, since subsidiarity recognizes the importance of the mediating structures above the mega-structures, any policy that applies this principle must clearly differentiate both structures. Finally, subsidiarity mandates the localization of societal problem solving, including the obligation to ensure that individuals and lesser social entities are well equipped to participate fully in collective decision making regarding issues that affect them and their communities.

Ranjault (1992:50) corroborates this by saying that “the concept of subsidiary is essential to a definition of federalism and of any decentralized political organization”. For Him subsidiary presupposes an organized society consisting of hierarchical or concentric groupings, and the establishment of a “necessarily dynamic equilibrium between liberty and authority, or between autonomy and equity” for each of these levels of society.

6. How Subsidiarity Differs from other Related Principles

The socio-ethical principle of subsidiary has close affinity with some socio-political principles that promote the advancement of the common good with special emphasis on lesser social entities. Such principles include federalism, decentralization, socialism, liberalism and devolution of powers. Though these principles are in some ways closely related to subsidiarity, there also exist substantial differences between them.

With regard to federalism which is at the heart of the American constitution, it shares with subsidiarity a common adverse for centralization and holds that true democracy is a product of local institutions and self-reliance. Federalism as enshrined in the constitution of many independent nations consist in the separation and balance of political powers among the various segments of a country as well as the division of sovereignty between the state and federal governments. Alexis De Tocqueville, an admirer of the principle of federalism refers to it as “administrative decentralization” which fosters the active participation of citizens in real...political life beginning with the local(sub-state) level (2000, 40, 82-93). Hence, federalism is interested in separating and balancing powers between the federal and state governments and limiting the function of each to its sphere of operation.

On the other hand subsidiary, while agreeing with the above localization of issues, insists that political liberty must go beyond limiting the functions of federal as well as the state governments to foster the virtues manifested and developed in the free and responsible actions of individuals, families and local social, political and civil associations. Subsidiarity goes beyond geographical boundaries and advocates for the freedom and support of individuals and small social entities.

Decentralization is also closely related to subsidiarity. As a principle it frowns at the concentration of authority and resources at the top. Dubios and Fattore (2009:707-711) after analyzing more than forty definition of decentralization, conclude that the concept refers to both a structure and a process; that it focuses on questions of authority, responsibility and power as well as functions and resources, and it draws attention to the transferring entity (central government) and the receiving entities (sub-national government). Advocates of the principle of decentralization argue that a government will perform better if it is closer to the people it is meant to serve. The citizen will also get more out of it and be more willing to accept government authority (White 2011:1). Thus decentralization is justified according to Stoker (1998: 17-28) to enhance the legitimacy of government power, which is one of the defining features of good governance.

Robert Ryan et al (2015: 2-5) divided decentralization into four major dimensions namely: fiscal, administrative (which consist of deconcentration, delegation and devolution) political and market decentralization. In all its dimensions decentralization consists in the granting of authority, responsibility and autonomy from the central authority to the subordinate local or regional bodies.

Like subsidiarity, decentralization recognizes the local or small social entities but unlike subsidiarity it continues to subordinate these smaller entities to the central authority thereby interfering with their freedom. The small social groups remain answerable to the central authorities. On the contrary the principle of subsidiarity, as Vischer (2001:142) observes offers a model which is “rooted in a social justice tradition that stresses both individual liberty and communitarian values”.

Subsidiarity also differs from liberalism and socialism. Liberalism is a political philosophy which basically stresses the liberty and equality of human being in the society. As a political doctrine it views the promotion and protection of individual freedom as the central problem of politics. Though it admits that government can pose a threat to liberty, it sees government as a necessary tool for protecting individuals from being harmed by others. Hence authority or government is principally instituted to prevent crime, it was not instituted with the primary aim of assisting the social or economic life of the lower bodies of society. On the contrary the principle of subsidiarity is essentially directed towards assisting the social and economic life of the individual and small local entities.

With regard to socialism, it favours an economic system based on public or collective ownership of the means of production under the control of the government. Hence in socialism the government controls the means of production as well the distribution of goods. Socialism unlike subsidiarity stifles individual initiative and freedom and makes the individual dependent on the government. In subsidiarity it is believed that every individual, family or social group has something unique to contribute, these smaller social entities are allowed their freedom and initiative and are merely assisted by government where necessary especially in the provision of an enabling environment as well as relevant resources.

Subsidiarity also differ from the principle of devolution of power which is a form of decentralization. Devolution is the statutory granting of powers from central government of a sovereign state to govern at a subnational level such as regional, local or state level. This principle seeks to reduce the power of the federal government by transforming some of it to the state and local governments. It defines the areas or issues which the state, regional or local government can legislate upon and exercise their authority without any clash with the federal government both in terms of policy making and resource control.

Though the principle of devolution of power allows some measure of freedom to the state and local governments with some areas of exclusive rights, it differs from subsidiarity because in it the central government still controls some areas such as security, mineral exploration, value added tax (VAT), federal road construction, electricity etc., which the local authorities could carry out more efficiently with the support of the federal government. Subsidiarity on the contrary does not reserve any area to the exclusive right of the federal or central government but advocates that issues can better be handled at the local level as long as the individual or small social organizations have the capacity to do so and that the federal or central government should provide the enabling environment and also offer the needed assistance to these lesser social entities.

7. The Positive Effects of Subsidiarity and its Relevance in the Contemporary World

The principle of subsidiarity if accepted and fully implemented will bestow multiple social benefits to the human society. Subsidiarity in advocating a grassroots mobilization posture which brings decision making and implementation close to the people concerned, recognizes and promotes the freedom and initiative of individuals and lesser social organizations thereby enlisting their maximum support and cooperation towards the effective accomplishment of the common good.

The subsidiarity principle in assuming that individuals and intermediate sized communities or institutions (e.g. the family, town unions, labour unions, voluntary agencies, religious bodies, local authorities etc.) have a lot to offer for the development of the human society encourages the government or higher social organizations to create the social condition necessary for their full development.

The positive effects of a socio-political and economic system governed by the principle of subsidiarity cannot be overemphasized. With subsidiarity, individual and group initiatives are given maximum scope to tackle problems. Community and stakeholder engagement are promoted where decisions making and implementation are localized.

Secondly, as Richard Macrory (2008: 657) observes, systematic failures of the type seen in the economic crash of 2007/08 can largely be avoided. This is because diverse solutions to common problems avoid common mode failure. With subsidiarity which offers multiple methods of doing things, it is difficult for the entire system to collapse because of the failure of one method initiated at the center.

Thirdly, when the principle of subsidiarity is adopted, local participation and collaboration are enhanced unlike when policies and implementations are initiated from the top to the exclusion of individual and group initiatives. Subsidiarity therefore facilitates immediate response to problems as well as more personalized addresses to local issues.

Fourthly, subsidiarity reduces and sometimes eliminates inefficiencies by eliminating reliance on central government bureaucracies and budgetary constraints. Unnecessary protocols and delays are reduced by subsidiarity so also is the excessive cost of running government from top to bottom. Subsidiarity principle reduces the cost of governance as well as cost of executing projects because of the contributions of local resources, human and material.

The principle of subsidiarity as we have indicated above protects individuals and social organizations from abuses by higher social authority who should assist individuals and intermediate social groups in fulfilling their social responsibilities.

The relevance of the principle of subsidiarity in the contemporary world is attested to by its adoption by many nations and international bodies. The European Union treaty is based on this principle so also is the American constitution. It is also implicitly and partially present in the constitution of many independent nations.

With the recognition of the importance of grassroots mobilization of human and material resources towards the provision of common good based on the firm belief in the peculiarity, endowment and initiative of individuals and intermediate social entities, the adoption of the principle of subsidiarity has become imperative. If the contemporary society is to carry everyone along with their diverse skills and initiatives, then the subsidiarity principle is the answer. If the various segments of the organized world is to achieve significant and steady progress in the provision of the common good then everybody should be involved. The central government should not usurp the duty of the individuals, families, social groups and states but should support them with the much needed resources to discharge the duties within their competence. We can say emphatically that the future of the contemporary world lies in the adoption of the principle of subsidiarity.

8. An Appraisal of the Principle of Subsidiarity

It must be stated that any social system that rejects subsidiarity spells doom for individual freedom and initiative. Such a system will promote inefficiency, extravagance, stagnation and poverty. It will also breeds redundancy and injustice.

The prediction of Tocqueville that modern democratic governments would degenerate into a massive paternalistic state which would control all the affairs of the individual insuring that all his needs were met whether he contributes or not is quite *ad rem* when we consider closely any society that snubs the principle of subsidiarity. Speaking of the individuals in such a society Tocqueville observes. "For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property and subdivides their inheritance; what remains but spare them all the cares of thinking and all the troubles of living" (cited by Bosnich, 1996:1). Subsidiarity as a principle, in line with the position of Tocqueville, is strongly opposed to any system that keeps the individual in perpetual childhood. Any systems that promotes centralization, socialism and welfarism is strongly rejected by subsidiarity. The top-down centralized, arbitrary and bureaucratic planning reminiscence of the former USSR proved a disaster because it contradicted the

principle of subsidiarity. Any system that stifles the freedom and creativity of the individual and smaller social groups like the family, town unions, labour organization, non-governmental bodies, religious groups, local authorities etc. retards growth and development. This principle when applied to supranational organizations like the European Union, the ECOWAS, the African Union etc., increases in importance and utility. It is a principle that developed and has relevance in the family setting where every member is supported to express his talent for the growth of the family. Its relevance continues in the small community where every individual, family and social group is recognized by the community as a relevant contributor to community development and supported in every possible way to be involved in providing the common good. This is a principle that has universal application in every aspect of the social, political and economic life of the human society both in civil and cooperate affairs. According to Ryan and Woods (2015: 8), “at a conceptual level, a key aspect of synergy between decentralization and subsidiarity relates to the advantages that local government or the constituent parts of supranational organization have with regard to the allocative function i.e. the quest for allocative efficiency”. In appraising subsidiarity, it must be viewed as a two-sided coin. It is a principle that works on the lower level of government, i.e. the family, local authority, labour unions, states or member states, if the objective of an action can be achieved at that level. It also finds a competence on a higher level, i.e. central government or community level (in cases of bodies like EU, ECOWAS etc.) if the said objective cannot be achieved at the lower level.

Conversely, Shilling (1995: 1) sees it as a “double-edged sword” which prevents both the higher and the lower levels from taking an action in areas properly falling within each other’s respective sphere of action. From the foregoing it means that the subsidiarity principle protects the use of powers by the level of government best suited to achieve a certain objective against the encroachment of another level. At a closer look one discovers that the principle shields the individual and smaller social organizations from the domineering powers of the higher authorities. It restricts the exercise of higher authority’s competences. The application of this principle serves as a kind of antidote to allay the fears of individual and smaller social entities of the possible usurpation of their freedom and responsibilities by the higher level of authority.

It must also be understood that subsidiarity as a principle does not merely solicit the support of the higher authorities to the smaller bodies to enable them carry out the actions within their competence. It also calls on them to undertake duties that cannot be effectively carried out by these smaller bodies. It must intervene when necessary, assist when necessary and show restraint when necessary in the affairs smaller bodies.

9. Conclusion

Our exposition of the socio-ethical principle of subsidiarity above has presented it as a principle that recognizes and respects the value of human freedom and initiative. It is a principle that abhors redundancy. In advocating for solidarity towards the less privileged strata of the society by the higher ones, it insists on the engagement and participation of these lesser social entities in affairs that concern them directly which is also within their competence to decided and execute. It rejects any attempt by higher authorities to usurp the duties of smaller entities or any attempt to absorb these lesser entities. Holding firmly to the truth that every individual, social organization, cultural and geographical entity has something to contribute towards the growth of the human society, this principle urges that none should be left out, rather the weaker ones should be assisted to carry out works that they can effectively execute.

It is the contention of this paper, therefore, that if this principle is adopted and practiced it will eliminate redundancy, economic waste, unnecessary bureaucracy, inefficiency and poverty. It will surely spur efficiency, co-operation, and socio-economic growth. The future of the contemporary world, we may say, lies in adopting and practicing the principle of subsidiarity.

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