



## JUSTIFICATION TO URGENTLY END THE HIGH-RISK CHILD BEGGING CULTURE OF THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM OF NORTHERN NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

Recent study showed that three out of every six boys sent into the almajiri system in Northern Nigeria die. One more is lost and about two survive. This puts Nigeria in a precarious situation in respect to child mortality and since nothing can be done about this, despite previous notable attempts from Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, it is paramount that this system of Qur'anic education of little boys be stopped urgently. Systematic approaches have been recommended such as bettering the welfare of the vulnerable rural mothers who give birth to these boys, and the improvement of other sociopolitical factors that affect their livelihoods. The study recommends the reintroduction of the well-organized pre-colonial Islamiyya system of Qur'anic education instead of the Almajiri one, which exposes these vulnerable boys not just to begging, but also to diseases, physical trauma, harsh weather, hunger, trafficking and even becoming the pool for the recruitment of hooligans, political thuggery and terrorism.

### Keywords

Almajiri system, Child begging, Child Mortality, Socioeconomic status, Mother's education, Sexual and Reproductive rights, Human rights.

### INTRODUCTION

A recent study shows that for every six boys sent into the Almajiri system of begging in Northern Nigeria, three die, the survival of one is not certain and then two survive (Makama, Makama, Waziri & Mustapha, 2024). This is a huge problem that needs to be addressed urgently. Originally, the Almajiris are male pupils of school age who left their homes in search of Quranic education.

They were placed in care of teachers who prepared them for learning the basics of Quranic education. But the teachers, in most cases, are unable to meet all the needs of their pupils. The pupils are therefore obliged to beg in the neighbourhood to supplement their rations and other needs. Begging for food is part of the training so that they could appreciate how poor people live. But over time, the practice had broken down and bastardized and the pupils abandoned to their fate. Today, the almajiris have become a major societal problem. Neglected by their parents and abandoned by the state, the often scruffy, ill-clad and deprived children always roam the streets in search of livelihood (This Day Live, 2024).

### **Conceptual Definitions**

Who is an Almajiri? Almajiri which translates to “learner” is someone irrespective of gender who searches for knowledge at home or on transit and displays high moral behaviour. While *Mabaraci* which means “Beggar” is any person who begs for assistance on the street or from house to house as a result of some deformity or disability; children between the ages of seven and fifteen who roam about with the purpose of getting assistance or arms; or even a child who engages in some form of labour to earn a living.

### **Key Principles**

**Empowerment:** to empower the mother and child for better survival.

**Autonomy:** to elevate both mother and child to a mental state where they can make decisions of their own without much looking out for society. Their interests should always come first.

**Justice and equity:** These boys have the right to live, get some education and be better citizens of the country. The Nigerian constitution makes available the right to education for every child. This must be religiously implemented.

### **Social Determinants**

**Ethno-religious status:** The demographic identity of a person or people in relation to their tribe or ethnicity gives them an ethnic status and this is important in the Nigerian society. In the same way and particularly in the North, one’s identity based on their religion is their religious status. Majority of the members of the Hausa and Fulani tribes in Northern Nigeria are Muslims, giving them that “all-important” ethno-religious identity. This is so significant to the point that the members of the Hausa and Fulani tribes who are not Muslims are given a completely different identity and in some parts of the core northern societies even treated different from the rest. These set of people are called the Maguzawa tribe (Osewe and Musa, 2018). Therefore, the Hausa-Fulani tribes of northern Nigeria who are Muslims are the core practitioners of this system.

**Poverty:** Extreme lack that limits or completely removes access to basic needs and amenities such as drinking water, food, good shelter, clothes, parental care, access to healthcare etc, are characteristics and outcomes of poverty. The consequence of these extreme conditions is the grossly reduced quality of life due to malnutrition, increased vulnerability to diseases, especially

infections, increased vulnerability to physical trauma, predators- both human and animals and the most severe outcome which is death. The death of a child 1 year or less is infant mortality. If the child is between 1 and 5 years, it is under-5 mortality. If the children are between 5 and 18 years, it is child mortality (Latif, Ashraf & Zeeshan, 2019; Taylor-Robinson, Lai, Wickham, Rose, Norman, Bamba, Whitehead and Barr, 2019). Child mortality is greatly affected by little or no economic development with the absence of sophisticated public health interventions (Christian, Mullany, Hurley, Katz & Black, 2019; Vaivada, Gaffey & Bhutta, 2017) and poor living standards (O'Hare, Makuta, Chinuala & Bar-zeev, 2013).

**Mother's status (education, health and reproductive autonomy):** Many case studies suggest that a mother's education is one of the most important predictors of infant and child mortality (Amoah & Asamoah, 2022; Anyamele, Ukawuilulu & Akanegbu, 2017; Balaj and York, 2021). It is becoming increasingly clear that fertility and child mortality in developing countries are causally related to the autonomy of women inside and outside the homes (Eswaran, 2002). An increase in female autonomy translates to a reduction in fertility and hence to reduce child mortality rates. The rural women in Far North of Nigeria give birth to approximately 12 children in their lifetime. By age 30, a woman living in the rural setting of Northern Nigeria should have had 7 children and by age 50, 13 children (Makama et al., 2024).

**Poor Parental care in general:** One of the major problems of the system is the lack of parental care these kids suffer from. A child at that age, even up to 17 years of age, needs care, close monitoring and adequate home training in order to be a better citizen and worthy contributor to society. But a typical Almajiri boarding school consists of the Mallam who is, as a matter of fact, a product of the system, hence an illiterate himself, archaic in ideology and radical, and his assistant with an average of 40-100 students crowded in a small, spaced room, in many situations, a hostel without mattresses. The process of tutoring the Almajiri is also very harsh: they are lashed with whips for every small mistake and are often deployed to do herculean jobs for their teachers. Most worrying of all is the fact that they are exposed to being indoctrinated into radicalism and extremism. In Nigeria, most of, if not all the students are made to believe that English language or western education, popularly called "Makaranta Allo" is a nuisance or sinful. They are also taught resentment and antagonism to non-believers, Christians and westerners alike. When an Almajiri graduates, he becomes too old to enroll in any formal sectors, thus becomes a threat to everyone but his own kind. He looks at everyone with bitterness and mistrust and consequently, can be called upon on only one service.... Jihad (Hoechner, 2018; Musa & A.B.D.U.L.K.A.R.I.M, 2014).

**Economic stabilization of structural adjustment programs designed to cope with deteriorating economic conditions:** Structural adjustment programmes are highly conditional national economic reforms that the citizenry of a country may conform to for the purpose of securing loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and/or the World Bank. The main objectives of these programmes include, but are not limited to, the structural improvements of a nation's

economy, the enhancement of international competitiveness, the propagation of economic growth, the reduction of government spending, the adopting and acceptance of free trade and the implementation of any other policy that will improve economic efficiency. In most cases, structural adjustments involve components such as, currency devaluation, reduction of budget deficits and the creation of subsidies by job retrenchments in the public sector, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, the deregulation of state-controlled industries, the attraction of foreign investments by easing regulations and the domestic improvement of tax collection. The essence of all these is to create economically self-sufficient nations with the conducive environment for innovations, investment and growth.

But sometimes, these programmes and economic initiatives impose austerity policies on already poor nations, thereby inflicting undue burden mostly on vulnerable groups, especially women and children. When loans coming from the global North are conditional as issued to the nations of the global south, neocolonial tendencies develop. This becomes a reality when the rich countries offer bailouts to poor ones in exchange for reforms that make the poor nations more vulnerable to exploitative investments by multinational corporations (Halvorsen & Michelsen, 2002; Macamo, 2005). These programmes may themselves contribute to increases in child mortality. This is because, the package of measures incorporated in the programmes often includes reduction in government spending for social services, as earlier stated, thereby increasing food prices and charges in exchange rates, leading to sharp reductions in family income (Ferreira & Schady, 2009). Also, besides the illiteracy, religion and lack of awareness suffered by the rural women of northern Nigeria, corruption and the mismanagement of resources by the government means, the social benefits due to these women do not reach them. Together with their powerlessness in terms of sexual and reproductive rights, they are also handicapped economically, politically and socially, thereby left vulnerable to men to continue giving birth to children they cannot cater for (Makama et al., 2024).

**The effectiveness of particular health interventions:** Some of these programmes may have practical or political difficulties in organizing comprehensive, community-based primary health care (Mosley, 1985). For example, Agencies such as UNICEF's GOBI program, WHO's EPI and USA centers for disease control's CCCD programmes focus on immunizable diseases and oral rehydration therapy. They narrow interventions as opposed to broadly based community health programs, creating a possible substitution effect in morbidity and mortality, as children who may be saved from dying from immunizable diseases or malaria will die instead from other non-immunizable diseases (Kasongo Project Team, 1981; Foster, 1984).

## DISCUSSION

### Political Context

*Social welfare programmes:* The Nigerian Government established the National commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) in 1989: This is to coordinate programmes aimed at improving the lives and livelihood of the Almajiris, since they constitute the nomadic pastoralists or Fulani Tribe

of Northern Nigeria (Olaniran, 2013). In his 2016 budget speech, President Muhammadu Buhari amplified his campaign promise of a social welfare programme which targets an estimated 25 million vulnerable citizens (Aderinoye, Ojokheta & Olojede, 2007). But the promise of a social welfare policy aimed at alleviating and reducing poverty in society is not a novel one. From the National poverty eradication and empowerment programme (NAPEP) by the president Olusegun Obasanjo administration (Obadan, 2001; Wohlmuth, 2008); to the subsidy re-investment and empowerment programme (SURE-P) by president Goodluck Jonathan, none has been able to address the formidable challenge (Oduenyi, Ordu & Okoli, 2019). That 104 million Nigerians still live below poverty line as of 2023 (Etim, 2023), is a monument of the abysmal failure of these poverty reduction policies. This problem needs serious attention with a strategy which will compartmentalize the situation, giving each unit or factor the much-needed priority and that also includes the almajiri system which clearly contributes to these alarming statistics.

*Continuity in sustaining government policies:* Also worthy of note is the recent move by the federal government of Nigeria under former president Goodluck Jonathan to set up a taskforce to investigate revitalizing and sustaining Almajiri education in the country (Olaniran, 2018). The Committee is to work with the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) with the aim to reduce inequality and provide access to education by the almajiris in the country. This move by the federal government to revitalize Almajiri education has three main objectives (Odigbo & Udalla, 2022); namely:

- To prioritize the issue of access, quality and equity in basic education for all, especially the Almajiris.
- To discourage alms begging which is common among out-of-school children in some northern parts of the country; and
- To develop an enabling environment that could further lead to effective integration of Qur'anic education into basic and functional educational programmes.

The Committee was equally mandated to address issues critical to the sustainability of nomadic education in the country. These include the operational feasibility of the school system, up-to-date infrastructural development and maintenance, the capacity building of academic and non-academic staff, purchase of school uniforms and facilities for learning and those of teaching as well. The provision of operational expenses of established institutions are to be identified (Olaniran, 2018).

**Political Will, not of the central government, but of the state governments:** Political will is essential to the process of sustainably implementing nomadic education in Nigeria. As the government administration changes from one to another, there seems to be a lack of enthusiasm on the part of some succeeding state administrators in replicating these programmes in their respective regions and states (Yagboyaju & Akintola, 2019). The best attempt made in specifically reaching out to the almajiris, in particular was the creation of the almajiri schools by Goodluck Jonathan's administration. The president launched the programme on April 10, 2012 at Gagiin Sokoto state, where he registered 25 pupils in the new model boarding school, equipped with modern facilities. It was the first of 400 such schools to be built in the northern states for which

the government had planned to spend about N15 billion. The then president said, the model schools would have facilities such as language laboratory, recitation hall, classrooms, dormitories, clinic, vocational workshop, dining hall and quarters for teachers. However, 5 years after, some of the schools have been converted to conventional schools while others are replete with decaying facilities. In general, the states of these schools have deteriorated, even the ones converted to conventional schools (Mac-Leva, Umar, Adebayo & Auwal, 2017).

### **Health Interventions**

**Research:** In all the studies done so far about child mortality, be it in Nigeria or in underdeveloped countries in general, the almajiri system was never put into serious consideration. Several papers (Filmer & Pritchett, 1997; Ssewanyana & Younger, 2008; Subbarao & Raney, 1995). have studied the socio-economic determinants of child mortality in underdeveloped nations of the world. In sub-Saharan African countries, 174 children out of 1000 die before reaching the age of five (UNICEF, 2011; 2016; 2018) and on an average, more than 1 in every 10 children born in Nigeria (159 per 1000 live births) does not survive to their 5th birthday (Uthman, Aiyedun & Yahaya, 2012). Kwara and Osun States had the lowest under-5 Mortality Rate (less than 60 per 1000 live births), while Jigawa, Kano, Sokoto, Niger and Adamawa states had the highest under-5 mortality rates (more than 200 per 1000 live births). This study has given us an insight to how Northern Nigeria contributes immensely to some of these negative indices of life to the nation. Since there is yet to be a clear primary data on the almajiri boys who survive till age 5, or age 10 or age 20; launching research to get primary data will be the first intervention plan.

**Orientation and re-orientation:** The use of Mass media and local community leaders to sensitize these rural communities and especially the mothers is paramount. The root of this almajiri problem is based on ideology. So, a massive re-orientation with an aggressive approach is needed to change the mentality of everyone involved such as: Islamic preachers, parents, adults, children, traditional and cultural leaders as well the political leadership of the North. The building of almajiri schools was a good step but not well thought out and it is for this reason it did not last. Politicians from the north hated the idea, radical preachers did not like it either and since these two sets of leaders are very influential in that region of the country, the disdain for that development spread so fast leading to its abandonment. The first orientation should be focused on parents and especially the mothers from the rural areas. Secondly, most of the people from the rural settings believe it is highly recommended and okay to beg in Islam. This tarnishes the image of the religion because it is not true. Begging and child molestation do not have roots in Islam as it was strongly discouraged. It has been observed that begging thrives because people have erroneously linked it or Bara with Islam. They believe mistakenly that Islam encourages begging. This is far from the truth, as the Prophet Muhammed (S.A.W) admonished his followers saying “I swear by Allah that it is better for one of you to take rope and gather firewood on his back than to come to a man and beg him whether he gives or refuse to give” (The Book of Miscellany, n.d). Also, in another Alhadith, Prophet Muhammed (S.A.W) said “the Upper hand is better than the lower hand” meaning the hand that gives is better than the hand that receives (Ogbuehi, 2019). However, the practice of

some Muslims in Nigeria has made it to appear to be an Islamic culture and phenomenon whereas it is not.

## **CONCLUSION**

The appalling findings of a minimum of 50% survival of the boys participating in the Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria is of serious concern that begs for the needed and urgent intervention to stop this system. The Almajiri system of Qur'anic education which requires the movement of the boys from place to place puts them at risk of diseases, physical harm, hunger and child predators. To effectively get to the root of this social problem, the social determinants encouraging this system were discussed, from the ethno-religious angle of the Hausa-Fulani tribes who are also Muslims, to the factor of poverty and the socio-economic status of the mothers involved as the main determinants- all have been discussed in relation to influencing child begging in Northern Nigeria. The economic stabilization of structural adjustment programmes designed to cope with deteriorating economic conditions, the below-par effectiveness of particular health interventions, ineffective social welfare programmes, the lack of continuity in sustaining government policies and the lack of political will of regional powers are all factors sustaining this system despite its worsening outcomes and associated obsolete practices.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

World organizations, international interest groups, organizations responsible for child survival and the government should partner with the upholders and custodians of Islam such as middle eastern governments, especially Saudi Arabia to use or create powerful forums and delegates to give massive awareness and re-orientation on this issue. There are Centers for Islamic research scattered across the North, these centers should be spurred, stimulated and challenged to engage in studies like this and participate fully in the re-orientation programmes in order to improve the lives of their members. Protecting Islam also involves protecting the lives of Muslims and these helpless boys are not exempted.

We also recommend some health interventions such as research, orientation and re-orientation of all stakeholders, aiming at the behavioural change of the mothers, fathers and community leaders towards child begging, especially in respect to culture and religion. Community-based health promotional programmes, structural interventions and above all, the abolishment of this system to make room for a better one in the Islamiyya system of Qur'anic learning which was in place during the pre-colonial era. If all these will be adopted, sustainable Development Goals 3, 4 and 10 should be achieved in the Northern region of Nigeria and above all, more boys will be able to survive to adulthood in the region.

### **Type of Proposed Health Interventions**

**Behavioural change:** A little office can be set up very close to the biggest Mosque in every region of 6 villages for mothers to come for counseling. If this may not be possible, a space in the palace of the local traditional chief/leader can be allocated for this purpose. The full data of each woman

can be taken when they visit. This should take a maximum of 10 weeks for every region consisting of 6 villages. Incentives can be initiated so that they become motivated to come. Examples could be:

- Giving of wrappers or other clothing materials when they come.
- Distribution of Mosquito nets and proper orientation on how to use them for each person.
- 500g to 1kg of grains, well packaged, to be given to each mother, etc.

Community-based intervention: The next intervention proposed is community-based. Religion and in particular, Islam and culture are very important in Northern Nigeria. The Imams, commonly called mallams are even considered as being more powerful than the president and these religious and traditional leaders command so much authority that they command herd followership which unfortunately drags blind followership in almost all cases. So, serious engagements with these Imams and traditional rulers are highly recommended. This will show them the data we've got from the recently discovered Almajiri-caused child mortality, which is beside the fact that it creates a source pool for terrorism and social vices. A step further is necessary to let them know that even though the abolishment of the Almajiri system would be advocated, the Quranic education can still go on using a different system.

**Structural Intervention:** The entire exercise of research and community-based interventions should be reported, the result and outcomes written in detail. This should be taken to the state governments of the states involved. Proposal for systemic changes and policymaking should include:

- An incomplete abolishment, or a restructuring of the system. One of the major problems of the system is the lack of parental care these kids suffer from. A child at that age, even up to 17 years of age, needs care, close monitoring, and adequate home training in order to be a better citizen and worthy contributor to society. The process of tutoring the Almajiri is also very harsh: they are lashed with whips for every little mistake and are often deployed to do herculean jobs for their teachers (Jungudo & Ani, 2014). The co-movement of child mortality and child labour has been backed by Basu and Van (1998), introducing child leisure into the parental utility function, resulting to more parental enjoyment of their children's leisure, reducing child labour as income rises. Once children are not at school, they are working (Glomm, 1997). Therefore, parents can only enjoy the leisure of their children if they also invest in them and take them to school.
- Bring back the pre-colonial system when students used to stay with their parents for proper moral upbringing. All the schools available then were in proximity with the immediate environment of the students. This will give adequate control of these children as well as allow them to enjoy the parental care they deserve.
- Inspectors were introduced to go round the schools and after inspection, they report to the Emir of the province all the matters regarding the affairs of the school. The schools were funded by the community, parents, zakkah, sadaqqah and sometimes through the farm output of the students.



- Their teachers must undergo training and adequate education to be able to impact the right knowledge and true doctrines of Islam to these children of which via the regular inspection, the bad teachers can be eventually fished out and dealt with. And already, there is a system very similar to that which runs, which is called the Islamiyyah. So, the various state governments can enforce Islamiyyah and promote it across the Northern states.
- This report and our recommendations will also be presented to other humanitarian non-governmental organizations and human right groups so that they join in putting immense pressure on these state Governments to adhere to these recommendations. Reports can also be sent to international organizations: UNICEF, UN, WHO, Amnesty International etc, so that they can as well take this pressure to the Federal Level of Government.
- Finally, the government cannot run away from its responsibilities. The government must improve in the provision of basic amenities, especially to these rural communities; improve their standard of living, build more schools around their domain and ensure that their children benefit from any social schemes such as scholarships, grants, funding, workshops, skills acquisitions and social welfare packages made available to their urban counterparts, irrespective of their status, tribe or religion, they are also Nigerians and fellow citizens.

### ***SDGs to be Addressed***

*SDG 4: Quality Education* (Bryce, Black & Victoria, 2013; Ruducha, Mann, Singh, Gemebo, Tessema, Baschieri & Berman, 2017).

*SDG 3: Good health and Wellbeing* (Bora and Saikia, 2018; Droti, O'Neill, Dovlo & Robertson, 2019; Khetrupal and Bhatia, 2020).

*SDG 10: Reduced inequalities* (McArthur, Rasmussen & Yamey, 2018; Uzochukwu, Okeke, Ogeze, Emunemu, Onibo, Ebenso & Mir, 2021).

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