



The Nexus between Almajiri System of Education and Forced Child Begging in Northern Nigeria

Introduction

On the 27th of September 2019, the global media space was saturated with a heart-rending report on the discovery of a building in Kaduna State, North-west Nigeria, where about 400 young boys and men, believed to be Almajiri, were rescued by the police. Citing local media reports verified by police authorities in Kaduna State, the UK Sun reported that “hundreds of children were rescued from ‘House of torture’ Islamic boarding school where they were kept in chains, starved and raped by staff”.¹

The report cited above is one of many unreported cases of human rights abuses and inhuman treatments meted out to Almajiri children under the guise of Quranic education. The Almajiri children live a marginalized and precarious life without any form of social security and are amongst the world’s most vulnerable social groups.

Desperate to make a living in any way they can, Almajiri children have been highly susceptible to the nefarious activities of exploiters, who force them into various forms of servitude. They have also been used by politicians and other persons seeking foot soldiers for acts of violence.

Numerous reports have indicated their employment in this capacity in ethno-religious and communal conflicts. Taking advantage of the vulnerability of Almajiri, the Boko Haram extremists succeeded in selling their hateful and blood thirsty philosophy to them by first filling a void that governments for decades allowed to exist. A close scrutiny of available literature on Boko Haram would reveal how the bureaucracy of the then fledging terrorist sect went as far as providing food and distributing motorcycles to win thousands of the Almajiri youths into their fold. Nigeria’s huge population of street children has also been a ready market for trans-national traffickers.

¹<http://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1021718/children-rescues-islamic-boarding-school-nigeria/>

It is however instructive to state here that, the Almajiri system of education, which is currently the subject of abuse and misuse, used to be a functional one in the pre-colonial times, which provided the platform for young people to acquire knowledge of Islam. It was a system, which at that time helped to ensure the spread and diffusion of Islamic knowledge as students traveled some distance away from the comfort of their homes to learn at the feet of great Islamic scholars. In its glory days, the Almajiri system was well funded, and communities did what they had to do to support scholars who had come from far to acquire Islamic knowledge. Quranic Malams had farms from which wards in their care could be fed. The reverse is the case today, as the Almajiri system has

been disrupted by the realities of modernity resulting in unpalatable consequences, especially for the Almajiri children. It is saddening to note that the Almajiri system, which contributed immensely to the socio-political, economic, religious and moral development of northern Nigeria in its glorious years is fast diminishing in its usefulness and rapidly outliving its relevance in the society where it was once held in high esteem.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of State and Non-State Response: The CHRICED Intervention

CHRICED is an organization that does not believe in mere lamentation about problems. We go a step further to strategically engage with the goal of finding and implementing sustainable solutions, which are capable of addressing the problems. It is against this background that CHRICED and **Anti-Slavery International (United Kingdom)**, the world's oldest human rights organization working to free people from all forms of slavery and servitude, with support from the **Bureau of Human Rights and Labor (DRL) of the United States Department of State**, designed and implemented an innovative research-based action on the nature of past and ongoing State and non-State interventions on the Almajiri issue, with emphasis on what has worked and what has not worked, exploring to what extent the lessons learned in Senegal could be applied to the Nigerian context; therefore laying a solid foundation for advocacy project to contribute towards finding sustainable solutions to the problem. This mindset informed the design and implementation of a project on '*Combating Forced-Child Begging in Nigeria*'.

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We recognize there have been a plethora of interventions at state and non-state level aimed at addressing the issues of Almajiri in Northern Nigeria. Unfortunately, all these efforts had not yielded any significant impact in terms of reducing the number of Almajiri children on the streets in the North.

In the course of this project, CHRICED engaged in networking, and sharing of ideas with a broad spectrum of stakeholders on how best to push for these reforms with the goal of eradicating the drivers of forced child begging. CHRICED also looks forward to collaborating with well-meaning stakeholders in the religious communities, the media, academia, government, as well as non-governmental entities to find sustainable and lasting solutions to this huge human right and human security challenge.

Conclusion and Recommendations

CHRICED is of the view that the problem with the Almajiri system of education is not the lack of adequate laws and policy frameworks. Rather, it has more to do with the lack of political will to fully implement existing laws and policies. CHRICED therefore calls on the Federal Government in partnership with States and Local Government Areas to immediately declare a state of emergency with the goal of rescuing street and out of school children across the country from their current state of misery and unending abuses. Beyond making political statements and speeches, there is the urgent need to take practical steps towards ameliorating the plight of marginalized and vulnerable Nigerians, whose lives have not been positively impacted by two decades of the democratic process. There should be urgent Action Plans on the part of the Nigerian state to address the plight of ordinary citizens like the millions of children on the streets of our country, who groan daily as a result of the absence of quality governance. On the same issue of street children and forced child begging, CHRICED equally calls on the wife of the President, Hajiya Aisha Buhari, who has become a vocal advocate of the poor and vulnerable to consider taking up the issue as part of her long list of advocacies for the marginalized people of this country.

Against this background, CHRICED therefore recommends the following:

- Government at all levels must ensure the enforcement of existing laws relating to forced child labour and street begging. To this end, the government should ensure that Almajiri school teachers who exploit children in anyway must be prosecuted and subject to sentences that are commensurate with the crimes committed.
- Similarly, some measure of parental responsibility has to be enforced.

In this regard, local communities, religious institutions, governments, civil society groups and other critical stakeholders need to find ways of sensitizing and mobilizing the parents of these Almajiri children to be more responsible. This becomes necessary in view of the fact that, no level of intervention by other stakeholders (government, NGOs, Civil Society, religious institutions, etc.), can totally substitute the role and place of parenting in a child's upbringing.

- Furthermore, the curriculum of the Almajiri schools need to be reviewed, reformed and restructured to reflect present day realities and future aspirations of the society in which the Almajiri children live. In this regard, the new curriculum should be a blend of Islamic education, Western education and life support skills such as ICT that can help the children cope effectively with the realities of modern world and to fit properly into the future they aspire for. To achieve this, the capacities of Malams (teachers) and operators of these Almajiri schools to run modern schools must be developed. The Malams should be trained in conventional teaching methods and in the use of ICTs for teaching. This will help to re-assure them that any subsequent innovation to be introduced into the system will not render them jobless. Also, there will be the need to train the Almajiri children on how to use ICTs for learning.
- There is also the need for the proper regulation and documentation of Almajiri schools. To this end, a special unit should be opened in every state to collate data on the actual number of Almajiri schools and the number of children enrolled in those schools. Also, Malams willing to establish and operate Almajiri schools must register with the appropriate authorities to ensure proper supervision and periodic inspection. Furthermore, the Malams operating these Almajiri schools should be made to keep a comprehensive register of all the students in their school and be held accountable for those children whenever the need arises.

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