



Shackled to the past: An exploration of the best prospects for combatting forced child begging in Nigeria

November 2020

All images in this report were provided by CHRICED

This research has been funded by the US Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), as part of an ASI-led project, "Combatting forced-child begging in Nigeria and Senegal and descent-based slavery in Niger and Mauritania."

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nigeria has more children growing up without a formal education than any other country. Public services, including education, are under heavy pressure due to demographic growth, economic scarcity, and chronic mismanagement. This is troubling: formal schooling is the primary engagement public institutions have with children to ensure their wellbeing, and as children reach adulthood, they can face reduced life chances if they have not received a formal education. In parallel, formal support for marginalised families and their children are limited. This can drive families to seek solutions that lie outside formal, state-sponsored public services.

Of the estimated 15 million out-of-school Nigerian children,¹ approximately 10 million are *Almajirai* – young students learning to recite the Qur’an under the control of their teachers, or *Mallamai*, under extremely austere living conditions. The *Almajiri* system, an enduring feature throughout northern Nigeria, has been under increasingly untenable pressure to meet wider demands ensuing from a demographic peak and limited public educational alternatives throughout marginalised communities. Largely unregulated and poorly positioned to serve as a safety net, the system has, since the 1980s, moved away from its roots as a traditional form of structured religious guidance to one based on exploitation, in which students are expected to sustain the schools and their own subsistence through begging and child labour.

The Resource Centre for Human Rights and Civic Education (CHRICED), a prominent Nigerian non-governmental organisation, and Anti-Slavery International (ASI), a longstanding stakeholder in addressing slavery issues and forced child begging in West Africa, have recognised the importance of confronting the harrowing human rights crisis confronted by 10 million *Almajiri* children surviving on the streets without any organised support. Faced with the limited number of research initiatives on the topic, CHRICED and ASI have worked in partnership since 2018 – with support from the US State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Issues (US DRL) – to improve current understanding of the challenges faced by the *Almajirai*, as well as the nature and effectiveness of past and present state and non-state interventions on forced child begging.

Relying on 435 qualitative interviews carried out from July 2018 to July 2020 with those closest to the issue (the *Almajirai* themselves, their surrounding community, and relevant stakeholders) in Borno, Kano, and Nasarawa states, as well as an in-depth desk review, this report presents CHRICED and ASI’s research findings.

Section One contextualises and assesses the immediate difficulties (such as precarious access to food, accommodation, hygiene, and health services) and long-term challenges (including lack of diversified education and life skills; severe isolation and social marginalisation) facing the *Almajirai* as the traditional system struggles to cope with the increasing pressures of contemporary Nigerian society.

Section Two assesses the successes and failures of previous governmental and non-governmental interventions, as well as informal localised efforts to support the *Almajirai*. This report supports the argument that ad hoc and short-term interventions, which get little buy-in from communities and critical stakeholders, rarely achieve the desired impact, and calls instead for a systematic and incremental approach by the state to find a sustainable solution to the issue.

¹ This is a worst-case estimate, as explained in the Introduction.

Section Three relies on insights from those closest to the issue and a critical examination of what has and has not worked to highlight promising insights, recommendations, and action points for key stakeholders. The latter emphasize the importance of the federal and state governments re-committing to their responsibility through Nigerian law to care for vulnerable children. This requires a dramatic escalation of support for marginalised communities, including working with national and international partners to standardise non-formal educational approaches in tandem with a supplemental school feeding programme as hunger constitutes the primary driver of forced child begging. In parallel, federal and state level governments should refrain from narrow criminalization of begging that risk further marginalizing the *Almajirai*, and strengthen instead their collaboration with child protection actors and law enforcement institutions (e.g. the Nigeria Police Force, the Sharia Police, the National Judicial Council, and the National Human Rights Commission) to document, investigate and bring to justice perpetrators of abuses against *Almajiri* children, in line with the Child Rights Act and other laws to which Nigeria is bound.

Notable terms

Almajiri (plural *Almajirai*), derived from the Arabic word *Mahajirun* (emigrants), is the Hausa word referring locally to a person who migrates in the quest for Islamic knowledge (Kashim 2015: 1). While most traditional definitions refer more simply to “children sent from their homes and entrusted into the care of Islamic teachers for Islamic studies” (Ifijeh and Iwu-James 2012: 99), the term *Almajiri* now often includes Nigerian children who pursue Islamic education as well as children who publicly beg for assistance or engage in menial labour to subsist while living on the streets (Muhammad 2010: 3-7).

Begging, often known locally as *Bara* and *Maula*, is a common practice of *Almajirai* to appeal and request help from people and households. It is usually practiced in neighbourhoods and other lucrative locations such as car parks and during public events. The *Almajirai* usually beg for leftover food, soap to wash and bathe with, and old clothes. Sometimes money is collected, usually on Fridays and during celebrations. The focus is typically not to raise money but instead to merely gain enough food or other resources needed for immediate sustenance.

Islamiyyah or *Nizamiyya* schools, which derives from the Arabic *Nizam* (system), are defined by a format that combines elements of traditional curriculum with educational models inspired by western and Arab models. *Islamiyyah* schools aim to honour Islamic education, while at the same time providing a pathway for religious students to engage with formal schooling.

Mallam (plural *Mallamai*) is an instructor who is well versed in Qur’anic and other forms of Islamic knowledge. The term is also used to refer to a teacher of other categories of knowledge and used as an honorific title for a person considered to be worthy of respect, regardless of whether that person works in education.

Tsangaya refers to the generally sparse school facilities that can comprise a room, veranda, hut, or even merely the shade of a tree where *Almajiri* students are gathered (Yahaya 2018: 2). The Hausa term is adopted from *Sangaya* in Kanuri, which means educational institution. Such schools are also known as *Makarantar Allo*, derived from the *Allo* (wooden plates in Hausa) that the students use to write out the verses they are trained to recite. *Tsangaya* has other names such as *Makarantar alkur’ani*, *Makarantar Muhammadiyya*, and *Makarantar Toka* (Babajo 2017).

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act stems from the Universal Primary Education scheme launched in 1976 - which was followed by the National Policy on Education in 1977, revised in 1981 and 1990. It was rebranded as UBE in 1999 and later enshrined into law in 2004. This federal initiative states that “every Government in Nigeria shall provide free, compulsory and universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age” (UBE Act 2004, Part 1 Section 2 (1)). The law further declares that every parent shall ensure that his or her child or ward attends and completes his or her primary school education and junior secondary school education (UBE Act 2004, Part 1 Section 2 (2)).

Zakat (obligatory alms) is one of the two forms of alms within Islam. It is an annual deduction made under Islamic law from certain kinds of wealth or property owned and held by an individual for at least one year. The sum deducted is then paid out directly to those in need or used for charitable and religious purposes. After *Zakat*, *Sadaqa* (truth or honesty) is the second form of charity in Islam. As a very general term, this voluntary act of piety can encompass offering a smile, a glass of water, or countless other acts of kindness. Both contributions are directly relevant to supporting the *Almajiri* system.



Almajiri boys memorising Qur'anic verses in a *Tsangaya* in Unguwar Gabas, Kumbotso Local Government Area, Kano state

Introduction

The substantial proportion of children growing up outside of formal support and oversight throughout the world is alarming, both for the long-term disadvantages most will face as well as the more immediate threats many encounter. While estimates vary, worldwide around one in ten children aged between six and eleven (approximately 60 million) are routinely excluded from formal schooling. Once established, such marginalisation becomes tough to escape: the likelihood of a child re-joining formal schooling in adolescence decreases roughly 10% each year outside formal systems.² This is of particular concern as education is traditionally the most prevalent engagement children have with organised support for development and wellbeing. For children growing up without recourse to formal support systems, there is a greater risk of abuse and exploitation, including through child begging.

This unsettling trend is particularly relevant to street children in Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for approximately half of all primary-aged students out of school worldwide, with highest prevalence in Nigeria. It is difficult to calculate the exact number of children out of school in Nigeria, partly because there are no commonly agreed-upon criteria for the category. The category ‘street children’, for example, might include children who never attend school of any kind, students who attend formal school occasionally, and children who attend traditional Qur’anic schools part time.³ Estimates vary of the number of children in Nigeria who are growing up outside formal education, ranging from 13.2 million (World Bank 2017) to 15 million (Adekunle et al. 2010). Overall, however, there is a general consensus that Nigeria simply has more children out of school than any other single country (UNESCO 2020).⁴

However, even though these children are not enrolled in formal education, this does not mean they have simply abandoned learning. Of the estimated 13-15 million Nigerian children not participating in formal education, many endeavour to learn in non-formal settings. The largest cohort of out-of-school children is those who study in Qur’anic schools in the predominantly Muslim north of Nigeria. While not exclusively composed of street children, the current generation of Qur’anic students is striving against great adversity to carry on a longstanding tradition of learning in the absence of more formalised alternatives. To appreciate contemporary Qur’anic education in Nigeria, it is useful to understand its grounding in Islamic folklore, whereby early Muslims sacrificed comfort and security to follow the Prophet Muhammad in service to their faith during the *Hijira* (migration). The *Mahajirun* (emigrants) faced many unknown risks during their journey, ultimately arriving at their destination with no housing arranged, no immediate means of livelihood, and no family to call upon, but were widely celebrated for their accomplishment (Adamu 2010: 8). It is this austere and often punishing religious template that later guided the formation of Islamic education in the old Borno Empire of Kanem-Bornu of northern Nigeria in the 11th century, when few alternate educational precedents existed locally.

²Following the Convention on the Rights of a Child this report defines children as anyone below 18 years of age (UNICEF 1989). Enrolment in formal education for 12-14 year-olds drops further to only two out of three children, and later to merely one in two 15-17 year-olds (UNESCO 2020).

³The category “street children” in Nigeria sometimes includes (1) children under 18 who live and work on the streets with no permanent residence who never attend schools of any kind; (2) children who live and work on the streets but return to some sort of parental home at night; (3) children who live and work on the streets, return home at night and sometimes attend formal school; (4) children who live and work on the streets only certain times of year, i.e. during the “dry season,” for example; (5) children who spend part of their time living and working on the streets and part of their time in a traditional Qur’anic school (Adekunle et al 2010: 42).

⁴The high number of children outside of formal education should also be contrasted with the large number of students enrolled, which the Nigerian Educational Cluster estimated at 46 million students.

A system soon developed echoing the earlier *Mahajirun* followers, with prospective students subsequently leaving their homes with almost no possessions and traveling to one of the few distant communities hosting Qur’anic teachers to pursue a religious education. In time, the name for these students evolved from *Mahajirun* to the equivalent Hausa word *Almajiri*, referring locally to a person who migrates in the quest for Islamic knowledge (Kashim 2015: 1).

While most traditional definitions refer more simply to “children sent from their homes and entrusted into the care of Islamic teachers for Islamic studies” (Ifijeh and Iwu-James 2012: 99), the term *Almajiri* now often includes those Nigerian children who pursue Islamic education as well as those children that publicly beg for assistance or engage in menial labour to subsist while living on the streets (Muhammad 2010: 3-7).⁵ This more expansive contemporary categorisation is due in large part to the typically decentralised and at times underfunded nature of the *Almajiri* system.

The *Almajiri* system is traditionally austere, with limited facilities and costs.⁶ Facilities include the *Allo* (wooden tablets) used in recitation and the generally sparse school facilities known as *Tsangaya*. Historically, the *Almajiri* system’s modest costs were adequately covered variously by public finances and local elites who supported the idea of mass Islamic education, as well as the local community and family members of the students (Shittu and Olaofe 2015: 37-46). This diverse local support was generally rooted in the wider community both valuing the educational and moral benefits of the *Almajiri* system, and believing they bore a religious and moral duty to support it.⁷ The result was a relatively unadorned, community-based system that successfully promoted literacy and rote religious education to countless generations of rural students throughout northern Nigeria. While the system was by no means easy on students, including routinely expecting children to do seasonal farm work or other small jobs to help cover basic needs beyond recitation, begging on the streets was not traditionally a primary occupation of *Almajiri* students (Shittu and Olaofe 2015: 37-46; Yahaya 2018: 4).⁸

The dramatic changes that have taken place in Nigeria’s post-Independence era (since 1960) have reconfigured the social landscape in the north of the country. One of the first relevant changes was the expansion of formal educational options throughout northern Nigeria. In 1960, northern Nigeria was home to half of the country’s population, but accounted for less than 10% of primary school enrolment nationally (Dudley 1968). Over the course of the following two decades, enrolment in primary schooling in northern Nigeria increased significantly, expanding its presence into many new communities. This expansion undermined the long-standing claim that the *Almajiri* system (traditional Qur’anic education system) was the one and only pathway into education, thus blurring its role in society. Secondly, the demographic growth in recent decades has overwhelmed the capacity of formal education and driven an unprecedented number of *Almajiri* students back to the traditional system.

⁵ Street begging is often known locally as *Bara* and *Maula*.

⁶ *Almajirai* traditionally learn within a *Tsangaya*. The Hausa term is adopted from *Sangaya* in Kanuri, which means educational institution. Such schools are also known as *Makarantar Allo*, derived from the *Allo* (wooden plates in Hausa) that the students use to write out the verses they are trained to recite. *Tsangaya* has other names such as *Makarantar alkur’ani*, *Makarantar Muhammadiyya*, and *Makarantar Toka* (Babajo 2017).

⁷ *Zakat* (alms) will be discussed further in Section Three. Also see Ayagi 1997.

⁸ *Almajiranci* is a term sometimes used to describe the system of Islamic education, but for simplicity it will be described descriptively throughout this research.

Appraising the current number of Qur’anic students is notoriously difficult as estimates range from 7 to 15 million children. The Universal Basic Education Commission (2010) and the World Bank (2017) both cite 9.5 million;⁹ that estimate alone indicates that Nigeria has the most children outside of formal education. Whatever the exact figure, this sizeable population of children has stretched traditional support for the *Almajiri* system to breaking point. Instead of imploding, however, the *Almajiri* community has counterintuitively expanded as the perceived ‘best’ of limited options. This is largely explained by the loosely organised *Almajiri* system swelling to accommodate demand as an alternative to the existing limited access to formal education.

As families seek accessible options for their children, novice instructors rise to meet demand and increasingly embrace child begging as a primary means of funding their work – often at the expense of both the children’s Islamic education and well-being. *Almajiri* students are now often seen wandering the streets seeking food, money, or casual employment, triggering wider contention over whether the system remains a traditional form of guidance, or if it has evolved into a purely exploitative practice. The situation has changed to such a degree that many prominent politicians are openly advocating that the system be outlawed, both for the sake of the children as well as the wider community.¹⁰

Over the last two decades, many efforts have been initiated to address this issue, most notably the Universal Basic Education Act (2004), which in theory provides free formal schooling to all Nigerian children. With *Almajiri* children comprising the vast majority (70-90%) of out-of-school children in Nigeria, this should have helped to reduce pressure on traditional Islamic education, and limited the community support that has enabled its continuing existing – but enrolment continues to rise. One potential explanation is that while Universal Basic Education aims to provide free formal education throughout Nigeria, in practice many states still require payment for fees, books, and other educational costs – assuming that such widespread education is available in the first place. This, combined with a challenging labour market offering few prospects, means many parents elect to enrol their children as *Almajirai*, seeing Qur’anic education as the most expeditious option being both affordable and culturally endorsed (Hoechner 2011, 2015).

Ancillary institutions have similarly tried to engage the issue over recent years with limited success. Anecdotal evidence from state *Tsangaya* associations hints at *Almajiri* enrolment continuing to outpace formal education in many northern communities, which matches up with various assessments estimating that the number of *Almajiri* has climbed consistently over recent decades.¹¹ This rise in prospective students continues to burden the traditional system well beyond its capacity, further compromising the children’s educational development, as well as increasing their exposure to exploitation as they struggle to meet their daily needs.

⁹Traditional estimates for the populations of *Almajirai* 3-18 years in northern Nigeria range between seven and 15 million, (Chidebell 2013: 175; Odumosu et al 2013:2). In 2003 the National Council for the Welfare of Destitute (NCWD) puts the population of the *Almajirai* at about 7 million, (Abdulqadir 2003). Nextier SPD more recently cited an increase to 13.2 million (2020). Estimates between 9-10 million are more enduring and widespread (Abbo, Zain, and Njidda 2017; Alao 2017; Ammani 2016; Ibrahim 2012; Iliyas, Rabi’u, and Adio 2017). Most commonly UNICEF (2014) is cited reported that the number of *Almajiri* in Nigeria are 9.5 million or 72% of the country’s 13.2 million out-of-school children, largely matching the Universal Basic Education Commission (2010) citing the total enrolment in Qur’anic schools as revealed by the report of the Ministerial Committee on Madrasah Education as 9,523,699, with North-East having 2,657,767 pupils, North-West 4,903,000, North-Central 1,133,288, South-West 807,317, South-East 3,827 and South-South 18,500.

¹⁰ Kano Governor Abdullahi Ganduje, for example, has recently announced the abolishment of the *Almajiri* system in the state, while longstanding concerns continue towards not only begging – but begging at such vulnerable young ages (Mudanssir 2010).

¹¹ Crisis Group estimated a 35% increase of *Almajiri* students between 2005 and 2010 (Crisis Group 2010: 10), while Nextier SPD cited an increase from 10.5 million in 2010 to 13.2 million in 2015 (Nextier SPD 2020). The disruption to formal education caused by ongoing violence in the North East region over recent years has presumably only furthered this growth in nonformal education.

The Resource Centre for Human Rights and Civic Education (CHRICED), as a prominent Nigerian human rights organisation based in Kano and Abuja, and Anti-Slavery International (ASI), as a longstanding stakeholder in addressing human rights, slavery issues and forced child begging in West Africa, both recognise the importance of confronting this serious human rights issue. With support from the US State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Issues (US DRL), CHRICED and ASI have been partnering since 2018 to explore practical avenues to protect *Almajiri* children from being controlled and exploited, as well as keeping them safe from the deprivation, and dangers they are exposed to on the streets and in Qur’anic schools.

Confronted with the limited number of research initiatives on the topic, this joint inquiry relies on nearly 450 qualitative interviews with members of the *Almajiri* community and relevant ancillary stakeholders, and an in-depth desk review of available academic literature, development reports, and secondary sources. The report first highlights the updated challenges facing the *Almajiri* system as it struggles to cope with the increasing pressures of contemporary Nigerian society. It then moves on to assess the successes and failures of previous governmental and nongovernmental interventions, as well as informal localised efforts to support the *Almajiri* community. By critically examining what has and has not worked, this report aims to increase understanding among key stakeholders of the depth of the problem, and to highlight promising insights, recommendations, and action points.



Most *Almajiri* children are out of the formal school system; they spend the better part of the day roaming the streets

Methodology

Several stages of research were pursued in order to better appreciate the challenges facing the *Almajirai* in contemporary Nigeria and how these children can best be supported. The *Almajiri* community remains traditionally marginalised and this is reflected in a limited number of relevant inquiries to date. While public data remains incomplete, available academic literature, development reports, and other secondary sources were reviewed to better assess what is already known. Building from this narrow foundation, expert stakeholders familiar with the *Almajiri* and child begging were consulted to better understand both the current state of *Almajiri* affairs and programming to support their community throughout Nigeria. This included interviews with stakeholders from academia, civil society, the development community, and various other sectors of Nigerian society to appreciate the issue more widely.

As well as considering the national impact of the *Almajiri* system, this research has closely considered a few selected communities to better appreciate the lived realities facing *Almajirai* on a local level. Focused inquiries were carried out in the states of Borno (North East), Kano (North West), and Nasarawa (North Central) to benefit from their differences in composition, socio-economic contexts, and political challenges.¹² This selection aimed at a diverse, yet in-depth review, to better understand any shared challenges as well as potentially common solutions. Within these varied contexts, approximately 150 respondents per state were engaged to better understand the challenges they faced, as well as efforts applied to address their challenges. Respondents comprised a deliberate balance of *Almajiri* children and key stakeholders directly involved in operating within or engaging with the *Almajiri* system.

Most importantly, 40 *Almajiri* students were surveyed with questionnaires in each state to illuminate wider perspectives and trends, which yielded consistent commonalities across the various northern states.¹³ This wider awareness was further augmented with more discursive interviews and focus group sessions engaging with current and former *Almajirai* to appreciate greater nuances of the issues facing their communities. This dual approach was useful in underscoring both the widespread nature of *Almajiri* concerns, as well as contextualising the more general trends to better guide the findings in this report.

Beyond listening to children and young people, this research further reached out to relevant actors offering complementary perspectives on the *Almajiri* system in northern states. This included organising focus group discussions and interviews with *Mallamai*, parents or other heads of *Almajiri* households, community and traditional leaders (ranging from village and ward heads to sheiks), Islamic scholars, government officials, policymakers (permanent secretaries and directors responsible for relevant *Almajiri* programming), and operational staff responsible for field activities on government policies. This engagement provided a more comprehensive appreciation of the challenges facing the *Almajiri* community within their wider contexts.

¹² Borno, with an estimated population of 4.1 million, is socially conservative yet highly fluid due to the insurgency and migration taking place throughout the state. Kano is considerably larger with 9.4 million people, comprising both traditional and more progressive factions. Nasarawa, with under two million people, is more modern and casual owing in part to its close proximity to the capital, Abuja. 827 and South-South 18,500.

¹³ Data analysis included a quantitative approach based on the data generated from questionnaires and processed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to illustrate the relationship between variables that influence the *Almajiri* community.

While most participants in the research were eager to give their perspectives on the *Almajiri* system and the challenge of child begging, the sensitivity of the issues required great care in both accurate representation and ethical responsibility. The *Almajirai* consulted in this research were selected from host communities and internally displaced people camps within urban, semi-urban, and rural communities in each state.¹⁴ The varying populations of these communities required a graded approach, with more samples selected from urban areas due to their status as home to the greatest concentration of *Almajirai*.

The ages of respondents, ranging from seven to 20, required further precautions.¹⁵ This consideration was managed with careful planning and attention to the best interests of *Almajiri* children under 18. Participation was always voluntary, and the use of questionnaires or involvement in focus group discussions or interviews required agreement between the *Almajiri* child, their respective guardian or caregiver, and the local researcher. All engagements were held in protected public settings, while the names, contact information, and other identifying information of *Almajirai* and other vulnerable respondents were not retained.

Table 1: Categories of population, sample selection and data collection methods

Category of Population	Borno	Kano	Nasarawa	Data Collection
Current <i>Almajirai</i>	40	40	40	Questionnaires
Current and former <i>Almajirai</i>	15	15		Interviews and focus group discussion participants
Heads of households	40	40	40	Interviews
<i>Mallamai</i> (Islamic instructors)	15	15	15	Interviews
Islamic scholars	10	10	10	Interviews
Traditional leaders	10	10	10	Questionnaires
Policymakers (Permanent Secretaries and Directors responsible for relevant <i>Almajiri</i> programming)	10	10	10	Interviews
Operational staff responsible for field activities on government policies	10	10	10	Questionnaires
TOTAL respondents per state	150	150	135	

¹⁴ Borno (30.7%) and Kano (29.3%) have the largest number of *Almajirai* in the study. Other states have lower numbers ranging from 8% to 0.7%. The states include Bauchi, Benue, Borno, Federal Capital Territory, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Plateau, Sokoto, and Yobe.

¹⁵ The ages of *Almajiri* interviewees ranging from 7 to 20, while most were between 11 and 16 years of age. All were located within the three study states in the north, with 60% of *Almajiri* respondents from Borno, 30.7% from Kano, and 29.3% from Nasarawa (and neighbouring states).

The *Almajiri* system has served as an educational mainstay throughout northern Nigeria for much of the past 900 years. The system has provided a relatively popular alternative to several generations of students from rural and urban communities who lack access to formal education, but it has been strained under contemporary pressures. By engaging directly with the *Almajiri* community and stakeholders who aspire to support it, this research will provide an updated perspective on a longstanding yet neglected facet of the social and educational situation in northern Nigeria. Specifically, it highlights challenges facing *Almajiri* children that have begun to move the system away from its traditional role towards an increasingly exploitative reality, as well as review of earlier and ongoing efforts to confront such concerns. With insights from those closest to the issue, this report ultimately identifies those best practices with the greatest potential to better protect Nigeria's *Almajiri* children, many of whom are currently subsisting on the margins of society.

SECTION 1. Appreciating the challenges

It is commonly understood throughout northern Nigeria that the contemporary *Almajiri* system has moved away from the more regimented traditional approaches that guided earlier generations of students. The parental concern, community stewardship, and religious instruction that directed earlier generations of *Almajiri* children have evidently lapsed under the pressures of modernisation, and the wellbeing of an increasing number of students is often secondary to those stakeholders who prefer to exploit the system to their own advantage. To better support these marginalised children, it is vital to understand the current failings of the *Almajiri* system, and why families continue to believe it is the most viable path forward for their children.

Section One summarises what is known about wider pressures influencing the *Almajiri* system, and outlines many of the more basic challenges experienced by *Almajiri* students on a daily basis, most notably, forced child begging. By more holistically appreciating the direct and indirect challenges surrounding the *Almajiri* community, this research is well placed to evaluate current and future efforts to confront the most pressing concerns and better safeguard vulnerable children.

Wider challenges

The number of *Almajirai* is considerable, but they merely make up one of many large constituencies in Nigeria. The system operates in a context of large populations competing for limited resources. This is illustrated by the *Almajiri* system's niche educational role being overwhelmed by wider need for accessible schooling. This traditionally includes demand from communities where formal education is not offered, as well as from families increasingly facing financial hardship. As the population of northern Nigeria has grown, so has the absolute number of impoverished people, with over 80 million Nigerians now struggling to survive.¹⁶ This often means that the *Almajiri* system is an appealing option to offset the costs of raising children to Islamic education. While formal schooling is in theory free, the cost of educational materials and school fees in certain states is in fact a considerable sacrifice for many families.¹⁷

As one Kano interview respondent said, “parents just escape from their responsibilities by sending their children away from home to *Almajiri* schools,” while another Borno focus group respondent described the phenomenon merely as *Almajiri* parents trying to “reduce their burden.” This rationale could help explain why nearly a third (29.1%) of *Almajiri* respondents surveyed within this research mentioned a background in formal education before ultimately being transferred into the *Almajiri* system. Earlier research similarly argues that enrolment in Islamic schools is often not entirely motivated by religious conviction (USAID 2003; Abd-el-Khalik, Boyle, and Pier 2006). Muhammad Mintor, Child Protection Officer with the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development similarly said: “Most parents are sending their children to *Tsangayas* because of financial problems they are facing.”

¹⁶ The most recent estimates highlight at least 82.9 million Nigerians living on less than N137,430 (\$381.75) a year, excluding Borno as it was too dangerous to include in the research (National Bureau of Statistics 2020).

¹⁷ The Nigerian Free Universal Basic Education Act (2004) mandates that primary and secondary education is provided free of charge for all Nigerian children, including *Almajirai*, funded by the Consolidated Revenue Fund. In reality, the cost of educational materials and school fees are prohibitively expensive for many families. Further complicating the educational path forward for perspective students in northern Nigeria is the additional argument many families made during this research that formal education simply is not worth the cost. With an unemployment rate over 55% for young people aged 15-35 (Munshi 2019) and a university system that is anecdotally said to only be able to accept 10% of applicants, many argue that while the *Almajiri* system is imperfect, at least it's affordable when framed against limited expectations.



Almajiri children sometimes scavenge for food or valuables from waste disposal sites; this is the case with the photographed boy at Unguwar Gabas, Gezawa Local Government Area, Kano State

A finance policymaker agreed, acknowledging that “poverty is increasing so parents just send their children to *Almajiri* schools.” As was repeatedly shared by interview and focus group respondents, Qur’anic education is increasingly considered a way for impoverished parents to relinquish their responsibilities in the guise of sending their children to become educated within an *Almajiri* system that is not adequately supported or equipped to properly care for them.

A second reality influencing the *Almajiri* system is how many prominent stakeholders value the system in its compromised current form. The most vocal constituency are Islamic traditionalists who believe the status quo, even if imperfect, is beyond reform due to its pseudo-divine status. As Sheikh Bakura Assusaawi described the wider sentiment: “Every Islamic scholar had gone through the system which shows us that there is indeed a great benefit in that system which we cannot afford to lose. There is no other help apart from helping the religion and when we all neglect doing that there is never a way forward.” This traditionalist view is supported by many in the wider community who similarly resist change because they believe Islamic education is a religious obligation and the traditional manner is the only pious way to do it. “Even where there are problems, the *Almajiri* system is still useful because it provided the *Almajiri* the chance to study the *Qur’an* and other forms of Islamic knowledge,” said one Kano interview respondent. This widespread view was echoed in Borno as focus group participants shared their view that “there is no way any child who has been taught the holy Qur’an will not be righteously brought up” and that each child raised in the *Tsangaya* will be “of great benefit to his parents and his community.”

There is an additional group of community members who support the status quo: political and economic stakeholders that value the cheap, pliable labour provided by countless children walking the streets. Examples commonly cited during the research range from private businesses and agriculturalists appreciating the low cost of *Almajiri* workers, as well as political elites who value the *Almajirai*'s willingness to influence election campaigns by any means necessary for little compensation. As a policymaker with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development summarised during an interview: "The system comes with a lot of abuses and everyone is guilty in one way or the other because we all use *Almajirai* to do our work. Any child without oversight of parents will definitely be abused or exploited." Other research respondents more critically contend that *Mallamai* themselves are often to blame as they benefit from the current system. They are "frustrated and kicking against reforms because they have a motive as target which is sending the children begging for them," said a Nasarawa key informant. To what degree support for the status quo is driven by religious orthodoxy faith or personal interest is difficult to distinguish, as few will abandon the cover of religious tradition and confess to exploiting vulnerable children. Regardless a meaningful number of stakeholders, whether well-intentioned or self-serving, evidently support the *Almajiri* system as an enduring pillar of northern Nigerian society. While largely anecdotal, these examples are merely cited to highlight that the best interests of *Almajiri* children are far from the only concerns that must be considered. While such proponents for the status quo are not the only stakeholders involved in the debate guiding the *Almajiri* system, their influence cannot be ignored.

Taking the above into account, it is unsurprising that 10 million children are currently enrolled in the system. Rather, it is notable that the larger "abdication of societal and state responsibilities", as Sule-Kano contextualised the *Almajiri* system, has not resulted in more children becoming *Almajirai* amidst all of the other challenges facing contemporary Nigerian society (2006).

The wider economic pressures and political manipulation rife within Nigerian society are not unique to the *Almajiri* system. Its informal organisation and accommodating nature, however, make its community particularly vulnerable to exploitation. With this wider acknowledgement, it is all the more important to better safeguard the rights and welfare of vulnerable *Almajiri* children. The main areas of relevant concern subsequently involve those issues repeatedly highlighted by *Almajiri* respondents themselves, including an abject lack of basic needs for daily subsistence, educational failings precipitating long-term marginalisation, and the subsequent absence of personal safety experienced as *Almajirai* struggle to survive.

Basic needs as short-term challenges

Unsurprisingly, the most prominent challenge faced by *Almajirai* interviewed throughout this research was food security. Due in part to the urbanisation away from the more rural farming *Tsangayas* have historically relied on for subsistence, as well as the increasingly unreliable support from distant families facing their own scarcity, only 9.5% of *Almajirai* surveyed could rely on regular food from within the *Almajiri* system and its periphery – while 50.3% receive nothing. As was noted repeatedly across this research, access to decent food is often a problem for *Almajiri* children. Researchers especially noted the youngest *Almajirai* who have to wait in line for the *Mallam*, the family of the *Mallam*, the assistant of the *Mallam*, and more senior students to eat before they consume whatever is left. Such young children are almost always underfed and malnourished due to both the lack of food and the food left over being of poor quality.¹⁸ One *Almajiri* respondent from Kano shared a commonly held sentiment: "I never get enough food since I came here and I am always hungry."

¹⁸ While a majority of *Almajirai* respondents (61.7%) stated they eat what they collected, 5.4% mentioned sharing food with their *Mallam* and 6% cited "bigger students" taking their food.

Such scarcity often leads to *Almajirai* sourcing questionable food wherever they can, exposing them not merely to social threats that will be discussed later but also malnutrition and illness. As one *Almajiri* in Kano recalled his introduction to the system on the first day at the *Tsangaya*: “When it was time for dinner, my teacher gave me a bowl and told me to follow some other students to go and look for food. We then roamed the streets going from one house to another begging for food.” This was reinforced by Muhammad Mintor, Child Protection Officer with the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, who said: “It is only hunger that put them into pressure of begging.” Yet regularly consuming only what others will give away, often stale and in limited quantities, routinely results in *Almajirai* going hungry. Only 30.2% of *Almajirai* interviewed regularly had enough to eat, while 48.3% stated that they only occasionally were not hungry. This was generally true across all *Almajiri* research cohorts, and ties into the larger documented trend of poor diet leading to malnutrition, stunted growth, and the compromising of overall health (Peace 2012).



An *Almajiri* eating leftover food

A second common set of challenges shared by *Almajiri* children involves the exposure they face from precarious access to accommodation and hygiene, and the toll these liabilities take on already compromised health. At the core of this vulnerability is shelter, which – contrary to common assumptions – does not consistently involve sleeping outside. The vast majority of *Almajirai* surveyed (81.1%) had accommodation through schooling, be it in their *Tsangaya* (58.1%) or in their *Mallam*’s home (23%), which in some cases are one and the same. A minority of other respondents mentioned sleeping in homes where they worked informally, in neighbourhood shops, or with relatives. Only two *Almajirai* included in this research acknowledged sleeping outside, which, while still troubling, is less than is conventionally assumed. Unfortunately, having a roof over one’s head does not often equate to being protected.



Almajirai are victims of labour exploitation; the pictured boy is washing dishes in exchange for leftover food

An Islamic scholar in Kano emphasised this dynamic by highlighting how *Almajirai* often have to plead for what accommodation they do receive – or at times fabricate it themselves – as *Almajirai* will “beg house owners to sleep in their house’s grounds or gate while those in the outskirts of the state build houses with sticks to sleep there.” Even those students who technically have more formalised accommodation cited sleeping on mats and paper boxes in a single congested room shared with other *Almajirai*. The austere quality of such housing is highlighted by the example of one *Tsangaya* in Kano providing “accommodation” but little else; the building was incomplete, lacking windows and cracks in most of the walls. The only support the students received were worn-out mats to sleep on. As Sule-Kano more widely describes the ongoing reality: “The conditions under which they live are almost inhuman” (2006). An interviewee from Council of Ulama in Kano summed up the sad state of affairs: “If you go to where they sleep, you will cry because of their condition. It is not healthy.”

The unadorned facilities often comprising the *Almajiri* system furthermore typically fail to facilitate proper hygiene. As most *Tsangayas* have limited conveniences available to their students, *Almajirai* subsequently tend to rely on public taps and wells for water and use public soap or buy their own when they are able. In general, however, the *Almajirai* interviewed cited difficulties in obtaining basic essentials like soap, detergent, toothbrushes, and other toiletries. Keeping clean similarly requires planning. Bathing typically involves returning to the public tap each Friday and fetching water with their alms bowl for cleaning. Laundry was described by respondents as requiring a rotation system, often broken into two days; if the child only has one set of clothes, they would wash their shirt and cap one day, and trousers the next. This was a common concern as most *Almajirai* lack adequate covering to face the elements, which is particularly problematic in the colder seasons, leading many *Almajiri* children to cite the very real need for clothing and blankets (Sule-Kano 2006).



Almajiri roaming the streets, moving from house to house to beg for alms in Unguwar Gabas, Gezawa Local Government Area, Kano State

The nearly impossible struggle to meet basic needs, including limited hygiene and widespread malnutrition, further compounds health-related vulnerabilities. Living in at-best austere conditions with limited food and poor hygiene results in *Almajirai* routinely getting sick with stomach aches, diarrhoea, cholera, meningitis, and tuberculosis being most common. When *Almajirai* get sick, they face limited access to formal medical care. As recalled by current and former *Almajirai* more generally, *Mallamai* typically do not consult health care professionals. Interviews highlighted their scepticism towards conventional medicine and as such often resort to the use of herbal or traditional medicines, which can have serious implications including the untreated progression and potential transmission of communicable diseases to other *Almajirai*. Alternatively, those *Mallamai* that do subscribe to contemporary medicine often arbitrarily provide medicines with little concern over dosage, quality, or even if it is suited for the illness at hand. It is for this reason many *Almajirai* describe merely forming a circle around a sick friend and praying for them to get better (McGrann 2018). Such safety nets are often not effective. As an Islamic teacher in Kano recounted from last year: “I know of a dead boy found at Dangi Roundabout. He died because of the cold. Everyone assumes he is an *Almajiri*.” While many *Almajirai* surveyed technically have a roof over their heads, little else is typically provided to ease their unceasing quest for basic needs.

A final challenge that respondents cited during focus group discussions as a habitual struggle is paying for their education. Similar to formal education in Nigeria, the *Almajiri* system does not charge fees in theory, but in reality, comes with a cost. Attending *Tsangaya* requires *Kudin Laraba* (money for Wednesday), the weekly fee *Almajiri* students are expected to pay each Wednesday to their *Mallam*. While the amount of this fee is generally insignificant (N700–1400/ \$1.81-3.61 per week) and merely one of many sources of income for *Mallamai*, to the students already forced to beg and confronting numerous other challenges, the obligation is consequential.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Kudin Laraba* and *Kudin Tashe* are common practice among Hausa *Mallamai* in the northwest and northcentral, but rare and uncommon amongst Kanuri *Mallamai* in the northeast (Borno and Yobe). The sources of income for *Mallamai* are often limited to student fees, charity, charges on spiritual healing, spiritual consultations, peasant farming, and other entrepreneurial ventures such as cap making and embroidery.

Covering the weekly *Kudin Labara*, the seasonal *Kudin Tashe* (money for rising) on holidays, or even further taxes that *Mallams* apply on their students is yet another problem to solve with little room for error.²⁰ To raise needed funds, *Almajirai* will often work as quasi-licit domestic servants, porters, or hat makers, while others will often be forced into other jobs perceived to be hazardous that others avoid. As one interviewee clarified, the *Almajiri* will do whatever they have to do to satisfy the weekly demand for *Kudin Laraba*. “If they couldn’t get it [legally], they engage in illegal activities to get it so that they can be safe from the *Mallam*,” said Islamic Scholar Isamiyya-Ungoggo. Even meeting the basic needs of daily life, be it merely covering food and informal school fees, is subsequently a constant struggle for most *Almajirai*.

Educational needs as long-term challenges



A group of *Almajirai* memorising Qur'anic verses in a *Tsangaya*, in Unguwar Gabas, Kumbotso Local Government Area, Kano State

In addition to the more immediate basic needs confronting *Almajiri* children are the simultaneous development and educational challenges that threaten to compound longer-term vulnerabilities. Throughout this research, *Almajiri* youth largely reflected wider community sentiment that Islamic education offers value to marginalised families in northern states. Challenging the notion that *Almajiri* children wander the streets exclusively, the majority of respondents (65.1%) highlighted spending between six and nine hours a day studying the Qur'an, which is comparable to quantity and rote style of formal education throughout Nigeria. This relative opportunity could explain why a majority of *Almajirai* surveyed (62.8%) shared that they liked being *Almajiri* students. “It’s useful,” clarified one interview respondent in Kano, primarily “because it provides the chance to study.”

²⁰ The holiday fee, *Kudin Tashe*, is also paid to the *Mallam* by each student. The three main holidays observed in Tsangayas are Eid al Fitr (Hutun Karamar Sallah), Eid al Ad-ha (Hutun Babbar Sallah) and Eid al Maulud (Hutun Takutaha). As an example, on the issue of taxing *Almajiri* students, a member of the Council of Ulama in Kano highlighted the case whereby a *Mallam* taxed his students ₦50 (\$0.13) per day.

Upon further inquiry, the wider issue for many *Almajiri* students appears to be less the choice between Islamic instruction and secular education and instead more valuing any meaningful opportunity to avoid longer-term marginalisation and move forward. This concern was emphasised by *Almajiri* respondents repeatedly emphasising the importance of socialisation and acquiring relevant life skills in comparison to any overriding concern over what type of school they attended.

Long-term emotional and psychological wellbeing

Of the litany of challenges faced by *Almajiri* children, loneliness was one of the most common frustrations shared by survey and interview respondents. This is not to suggest that *Almajirai* are typically alone, as most interviewees recounted enduring overcrowded conditions regularly. Instead, a theme of being abandoned first by family and further reinforced by the ongoing rejection by society-at-large emerges across the board. While never an easy path, the current isolation *Almajirai* experience appears to be worsening. As one former *Almajiri* student in Borno described the change from his time as an *Almajiri*: “Throughout my stay, my father would visit me from time to time coming along with a donation for my teacher. But as the world became dynamic, everything changed now. Parents now neither check on their children nor their teacher.” Village Head Bulama Madu Kolo in Borno described the current reality: “Parents do not investigate the condition of their children. They have just abandoned them to survive by themselves, which is not good.” A focus group participant from the Council of Ulama further highlighted this emerging phenomenon whereby children are sent without provisions or support to the *Tsangaya* “to live whatever life he finds, whether good or bad.”

Counterintuitively, current and former *Almajirai* interviewed highlighted that parents were more likely to be involved in their children’s lives when they were older (11-16), while younger, more vulnerable students received less interest. An often cited and illustrative approach is how rural families enrol children into the *Almajiri* system in the dry season, while calling them home to help farm when needed in the rainy season. Far from mutually beneficial, this type of approach appears to underscore that *Almajiri* students and the wider system are not only losing traditional support from parents, but alternatively are now at times expected to serve their parent’s self-interest. One interview respondent in Nasarawa recalled intervening on behalf of three *Almajiri* that had been physically abused by their *Mallam*. “The parents were not happy upon seeing the children” rescued from the *Tsangaya*. Evidently, their value was primarily for “boasting that their children had been taken away to a far place for learning.” The Head of an *Islamiyyah* school in Kano added during an interview that the *Almajirai* “just roam the streets because their parents don’t care what they do.” This was reinforced by those inside *Tsangayas* as well, with an Islamic scholar in Kano lamenting: “Some students we have cannot take themselves home, so they are very lonely. Some might never go back home because their parents never come back.” As one *Almajiri* child from Nasarawa confessed: “I always wish I was back home, but I can’t go back so I am sometimes very sad.”

The profound disorientation that accompanies the perceived abandonment by ones’ parents is a formative experience for many *Almajiri* children that is only compounded by further isolation from the wider community. *Almajirai* from Kano spoke within focus groups of how secular students had the opportunity to “become somebody more than us” or “become important people”. While the majority of respondents said they were happy being *Almajirai*, only 67.1% believe they are equal to everyone else. This self-doubt, reinforced by cumulative rejection and the constant need to survive by any means necessary, lends credence to the stigma commonly associated with the *Almajirai*. As a policymaker in Kano described the development: “[I]t is harmful. You see begging has a psychological effect on the brain where you feel inferior to others, so the children do not achieve their full potential. They just end up doing menial work except for the lucky ones. So it is damaging to them. This begging leads to various other bad things in the society like drug abuse, theft, thuggery and other crimes. So it is definitely harmful.”

A Child Protection Officer with the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development noted: “Because nobody cared for them when they were children, and they have not lived with their parents, they risk eventually becoming something different rather than *Almajirai*, such as insurgents, thieves. Some even become killers.” While little was found throughout this research to directly support such claims, what was more prevalent was the wider shame and isolation that grew because “few give them much consideration,” to paraphrase several *Almajiri* respondents. One of the predominant challenges facing *Almajiri* children is consequently maintaining a belief that they are a valued part of society.

Building from the importance of a general sense of belonging, a second related frustration *Almajiri* respondents vocalised was the absence of life skills to navigate the shared society. Loosely categorised as all of the hidden pedagogical influences inherent in secular education, *Almajiri* students lament a neglected sense of belonging and the societal tools to better navigate the wider community. This categorisation includes the socialisation of meeting new people and gaining new perspectives to understand what wider opportunities are available in life, critical thinking skills to better evaluate such options, and finally vocational facilitation to better pursue subsequent interests. To date, many advocating for the *Almajiri* system cite its “thriving” state in part because of the opportunity it affords marginalised children to first acquire Islamic education as a foundation setting up the opportunity to “learn some trade or skill in the future,” as argued by an Islamic scholar within the system. *Almajiri* respondents, alternatively, were clearer on stating that while the fundamentals of Islamic education are valued, to meet future challenges, such practical skills are needed without delay.



A group of young *Almajirai* roaming the streets after their morning lessons in Yandodo Hoto, Nassarawa Local Government Area, Kano State

While the often unsatisfied basic daily needs of *Almajirai* understandably draw a great deal of concern, it is important to listen to the students themselves as they express repeated apprehension over their isolation and lack of life skills. If current *Almajiri* children are to avoid the challenges of longer-term marginalisation and the underlying lack of income and mobility that burden their predecessors, their guidance and educational development deserve similar attention.

Personal safety

The challenges faced by both a lack of basic daily needs, as well as the longer-term marginalisation stemming from a limited educational experience, were central to concerns repeatedly shared by *Almajiri* children and ancillary stakeholders. At times contrary to prevailing thoughts, *Almajiri* children were much more disturbed by these issues than more customary protection threats. In fact, 90.6% of respondents surveyed throughout this research indicated they never felt personally threatened as *Almajirai*.²¹ Yet while not emphasised as vocally as other concerns, it is still important to highlight some of the more egregious threats *Almajiri* children routinely confront to both contextualise their normalised reality, as well as better emphasise aspects of personal safety that deserve more attention.

The most direct threat *Almajirai* often face is corporal punishment within the *Tsangaya*. Building from Islamic Scholar Isamiyya-Ungoggo's earlier comment that *Almajirai* would do "whatever it took" to pay the *Kudin Laraba* out of fear of the *Mallam*, this relationship is often inherently difficult. Whether or not a strong hand is required to control a *Tsangaya* with 40 to 180 children living away from home was not discussed during the research, "it is common knowledge that the means of discipline in *Almajiri* schools are severe" (Sule 1994: 10).²² This primarily comprises hitting students with a cane, but can also include shouting, sharp looks, and denial of free time. Sadly, an estimated 20 to 30% of *Mallamai* further exploit this control for their own benefit, as they are in the judgement of the Borno State Sangaya Schools Association, "unscrupulous" (McGrann 2018).

Closely related are the threats to personal safety that *Almajiri* experience while begging in public. As is important to clarify, begging is not a preference for most *Almajirai*, with many enduring it only for subsistence. When surveyed, the vast majority of respondents (79.1%) admitted to begging on the street. Almost all (78.5%) were seeking food, often exclusively (64.2%) or in combination with clothes (12.2%), soap (1.4%), or money (0.7%). As will come as little surprise, a child spending up to eight hours a day wandering the streets asking for handouts as a last resort makes them "easy prey" for unscrupulous actors (Tsafe 2018). This includes being subjected to all forms of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse that while not emphasised often by respondents were troubling when discussed (Kabir 2002; Hoechner 2011).²³ One Borno focus group participant cited the more systematic efforts of "illegal organisations" to exploit the unsupervised children, highlighting seeing *Almajirai* "hang around on the street begging and doing some house chores, [yet] finally the boss will use the money." At other times, it is the *Almajirai* themselves that are the danger. As the Head of an *Islamiyyah* school in Danbare underscores: "*Almajirai* try to beg for food but if they don't get it, they have to go around and beg for money thereby engaging in other nefarious activities. A hungry person can do anything to eat." The case of one notorious Kano *Almajiri* who uses a knife and threats to kill, to rob or rape other boys, as recounted by a member of the Council of Ulama during an interview, highlights the horrific reality of life faced by children roaming the streets. In turn, most *Almajirai* (60.2%) surveyed in this research concentrate their begging in local, well-known neighbourhoods, while the remainder focus their efforts around market areas where there is relative safety amongst the large number of people. Nonetheless, respondents mentioned even with such precautions there is always a risk of traffic accidents, getting lost, or kidnapped as reiterated during an interview with an Islamic teacher in Hausawa-Tarauni.

²¹ The few who felt threatened reside in Borno and all linked the threat to times when Boko Haram attacked their villages, chased them from such villages, or were rumored to be on their way to or through the villages. None of them directly indicated any threat while in *Tsangaya*.

²² Sule (1994) highlights that since *Almajiri* schools can have populations of 180 pupils, it is very difficult for *Mallamai* to control all aspects of schooling.

²³ For more information on the vulnerability of *Almajirai* children to "gay rape" see Sarkingobir, Sambo, Hamza, and Tambari 2020 (prepublished).



A group of young *Almajirai* roaming the streets after their morning lessons in Yandodo Hoto, Nassarawa Local Government Area, Kano State

Abuse while working

While not formally begging, *Almajirai* working outside of the *Tsangaya* faced similar risks. As stated, students in theory can work while studying to support their basic needs. When surveyed, a majority of *Almajirai* (60.4%) cited engaging in various tasks for compensation, with 43.6% working regularly and 16.8% occasionally. Many of the tasks highlighted by respondents including cleaning, running errands, and tailoring are in and of themselves not traditionally problematic, with many *Almajirai* highlighting in focus group discussions that getting such a position was “lucky.”²⁴ With the minimum age for working in Nigeria being 12 years, the related concern is instead how little agency students have in performing such tasks, as their education and overall best interest are often quickly subordinate to the requirements of the employer (Government of Nigeria 2013).²⁵ This is rooted in many seeing *Almajiri* students as “useless people” to be regarded as free labour rather than taking any longer-term interest in their education or wellbeing (IRP 2013). As one *Almajiri* from Zamfara who was sent to Kano described the dynamic in a focus group discussion: “No one wants to give you anything, you have to either wash plates or clothes, fetch water, sweep or do other house chores before they give you anything.” Sadly, for the few hours of work a day, most respondents were rewarded merely with a meal or other basics such as soap.²⁶

²⁴ The most common tasks cited in focus group discussions include taking out waste from houses and small businesses, cleaning laundry, running errands, cleaning houses and other places, washing plates for restaurants (usually operated by housewives from within their homes), helping in selling small items for housewives and for the older *Almajirai* it may include knitting or hand stitching caps and embroidery on high-end clothes for tailors.

²⁵ Article 59 of the Labour Act; Articles 28 and 29 of the Child’s Rights Act (2003). Forced labour, alternatively, is illegal for any age group per Article 34 of the Constitution and Article 28 of the Child’s Rights Act (2003).

²⁶ Occasionally focus group respondents mentioned receiving a “small monetary reward.”

The mistreatment of children, whether through routine verbal, physical, and sexual abuse or their exploitation as child labour would typically not be the responsibility of the victim to endure. As UNICEF-Nigeria puts it, the *Almajirai* deserve “special mention” due to their vulnerability to different forms of physical and psychological hazards. With family often geographically distant and *Mallamai* generally focused on their own concerns, greater accountability is placed with institutional stakeholders. The *Almajirai* are technically under local control including the Local Government Area Council, the traditional ruler structures, the State Universal Basic



Another form of labour exploitation that *Almajiri* children face to survive

Education Boards (SUBEB), as well as federal oversight through both the Child’s Rights Act (2003) and National Policy on Child Labour (2014). Yet because of the absence of uniformity in policy, funding, and supervisory management of the entire basic education system, as well as efforts to monitor child labour, there is little tangible supervision.²⁷ As a Child Protection Officer with the Ministry of Women and Social Development points out: “You can’t consider the *Almajiri* system as child abuse because it is a religious matter and it is part of tradition, and even if you try, nobody will listen to you.” Instead, the authorities are often perceived as more of a threat, as likely to harass the *Almajirai* as much as help them. This is why anecdotal accounts of disillusioned *Almajirai* accepting dubious roles with unscrupulous political campaigns or joining armed movements are so widespread.²⁸ Facing so many challenges with so little support, *Almajiri* children often learn to mistrust the wider world as they do what they must to survive.

Conclusion

In considering the sheer scale of wider challenges facing Nigerian society, as well as the more direct pressures individual families often face, it is unsurprising that the *Almajiri* system endures. Contrasting the failure to expand access to formal education more widely, *Almajiri* education’s accommodating flexibility over centuries is a testament to its relevance. Yet as the Sultan of Sokoto aptly points out, this enduring pillar of religious education now less resembles its original Islamic foundation and more closely mimics the “hunger and poverty” commonly associated with its contemporary reality (Vanguard 2017).

After engaging with the *Almajiri* community directly throughout this research, it is clear that hunger and poverty are significant factors, both underscoring the importance of basic needs to survive today and longer-term empowerment to avoid long-term vulnerabilities tomorrow. These more immediate concerns, including food security and comprehensive accommodation needed to shield *Almajiri* children from endangerment, will be tethered together with longer-term concern over isolation and a lack of life skills to better appraise earlier and ongoing efforts to support *Almajiri* students for best practice moving forward.

²⁷The National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labour in Nigeria (2013 – 2017), for example, provided a roadmap for implementation of the National Policy on Child Labour in Nigeria, yet was delayed in its implementation due to funding constraints (U.S. Department of Labor 2014).

²⁸*Almajirai* are known to be prime targets for recruited by insurgents, with cases including the Maitasine riots in Kano, the Dangungu riot in Kaduna, the Bulunkutu riot in Borno state, and the Boko Haram insurgency (Peace 2012).

SECTION 2. Notable interventions

Almajiri boys resting in the shade in Yandodo, Nassarawa Local government Area, Kano State

The contemporary *Almajiri* system is currently beleaguered despite its foundation on traditional Qur'anic recitation, when few alternatives were available. As Nigerian society expands and modernises, the same demographic and economic pressures that often incapacitate limited public services are also overwhelming this niche educational approach. *Almajiri* education was never intended as a widescale safety net. The result is an arrangement that currently satisfies neither the basic needs of its 10 million *Almajiri* students, nor the requisite educational support they need to advance in contemporary Nigerian society. New approaches are sorely needed to confront what has become widely recognised as an outdated approach unable to cope with wider community needs. It is therefore useful to canvas continuing efforts for insights into promising interventions: there is a meaningful history of programming interventions from governmental stakeholders, local communities, and increasingly the international community to learn from moving forward.



Almajiri boys resting in the shade in Yandodo, Nassarawa Local government Area, Kano State

For the better part of the last 900 years, the *Almajiri* system was uniquely successful in providing educational opportunities in areas of Nigeria where few alternatives existed. This success was evidently built off two core factors complementing religious faith: community oversight and a relative availability of food. Social guidance appears to have been historically more prominent than it is today, with students in greater contact with their parents, be it studying Qur'anic recitation at the *Tsangaya* and sleeping at home or alternatively returning to join family regularly to help farm.

Even as the system expanded, with students spread over 30,000 *Tsangayas* in the early 20th century, traditional leaders built on parental guidance, exercising considerable control over the *Almajirai* and society at large (Reichmuth 1989). While parental involvement was consistently informal, it contributed to relative order, helped as well by community oversight. Similarly, food security was key. Whether cultivating crops at the *Tsangaya*, farming at home with family, relying on community *Zakat* (alms), or exchanging meals for labour, anecdotal accounts highlight greater flexibility in accessing food. Such balance covered essential need and ensured children received relative support in their quest for education. This comparative success, in concert with later British rule showing little interest in reforming education in northern states, led to the *Almajiri* system enduring through independence in 1960 and the ensuing years to follow. As stated, however, change was nonetheless coming as Nigerian society rapidly transformed in the post-independence era. The failure of more formalised public services to keep pace with such developments awkwardly positioned Qur'anic recitation into a more general contemporary role than it was originally intended – which explains its inability to adequately care for millions of marginalised children who now often end up begging to survive. As one Nasarawa interview respondent summarised, the traditional system is “quite different from what we are witnessing in the present day.” It is subsequently important to review further programming to better ensure *Almajiri* students and other marginalised children receive the support they deserve.

Universal education interventions

The difficulty of maintaining the traditional *Almajiri* system in the face of wider contemporary changes was not lost on community leaders. Building from a commonly held understanding that formal education had long been neglected in northern Nigeria, increasing efforts have taken place over the last century to acknowledge the value and scope of Qur'anic education, while introducing and integrating more formalised education. Two early examples were the Shahuci Judicial School (1928) and the School for Arabic Studies (1934) both featuring Islamic curricula, yet replacing recitation with debate and bringing in more modern facilities. These early steps were important in acknowledging the potential of updating the educational system in northern Nigeria as the most expedient path to safeguarding the wellbeing of vulnerable children. Also recognising the failure of the status quo to satisfy the post-independence aspirations of Nigeria, the federal government initiated repeated reforms – yet initially opted to unilaterally expand secular education.²⁹ The first notable initiative was Universal Primary Education in 1976, which was subsequently followed by the National Policy on Education in 1977 and later revised in 1981 and 1990. Such ambitious efforts, while formally successful in quickly expanding school enrolment, were ultimately viewed critically as larger numbers of students unsupported with adequate planning placed a heavy toll on quality (Okoroma 2006; Taiwo 1980). On a nationwide tour of the country's facilities in 1997, the Federal Minister of Education went as far as to assess most schools as “pathetic” (World Bank 2020). A subsequent national assessment noted that 80% of public schools lacked basic infrastructure, while 60% lacked curriculum modules and textbooks (Adekola 2007). The evident failure of earlier efforts in combination with wider pressure over global Millennium Development Goals led to the relaunching of what was rebranded as Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999, which was later enshrined into law in 2004. It states that “every Government in Nigeria shall provide free, compulsory and universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age.”³⁰ The law further declares that every parent shall ensure that his or her child or ward attends and completes his or her primary school education and junior secondary school education.³¹

²⁹ At independence in 1960, northern Nigeria (with over half of the country's population) accounted for less than 10% of primary-school enrolment and less than 5% at secondary-school level (Dudley 1968).

³⁰ The UBE Act 2004, Part 1 Section 2 (1).

³¹ The UBE Act 2004, Part 1 Section 2 (2).

Later, appreciating that *Almajirai* comprise the majority of out-of-school children, a specialised *Almajiri* Education Program was started in 2010 within the wider auspices of the UBE. It advocated for an integrated approach balancing both Islamic and formal educational styles. According to the Universal Basic Education Commission (2010), the main objectives of the policy framework are to:

- Ensure the institutional development of Islamic school system and the provision of requisite infrastructural and welfare facilities such that it functions as a true *Almajiri* education system;
- Address effectively and on a long-term basis the challenges facing the traditional Islamic education sector, especially as they relate to itinerancy and begging;
- Provide viable educational platforms and *Almajiri* Model Schools that could steadily and effectively integrate conventional disciplines into the Islamic educational system;
- Support the emergence of an enabling environment that could facilitate the effective integration of Islamic disciplines into the Basic Education Programme;
- Produce quality products that are imbued with the discipline, character, knowledge and skills to take full advantage of available opportunities and participate effectively and meaningfully in the socio-economic and political life of the nation; and
- Provide basic education access to all children of school age throughout the country.

To implement these objectives, three core approaches were drafted, including the establishment of integrated *Almajiri* Model Schools, introduction of basic education programming into *Tsangayas*, and providing support to community-owned *Tsangayas*.³² These initiatives were inaugurated in 2012 when President Goodluck Jonathan registered 25 pupils in a new model boarding school equipped with a language laboratory, recitation hall, classrooms, dormitories, clinic, vocational workshop, dining hall, and quarters for teachers. The intention was to feature Qur’anic education alongside formal education showcased with the best available resources, in the hope that parents would see the value of the initiative and send their children to such schools.

Formally, this would appear to be a notable accomplishment with N15 billion (then \$77 million) financing the building of 117 *Almajiri* Model Schools, improving another 138 existing Islamic schools, and investing in ancillary support needed to facilitate learning and coordination.³³ This latter step of the *Almajiri* Education Program included developing a harmonised curriculum and distributing new textbooks and teaching guides to all *Almajiri* Model Schools, as well as training 270 school proprietors and head teachers on curriculum implementation.³⁴ It also endeavoured to coordinate with the Universal Basic Education Commission through the training of 58 Quality Assurance Officers and State *Almajiri* Education Desk Officers and 174 SUBEB Desk Officers, Local Governments Education Secretaries, and Chairmen of School Based Management Committees on how to best support *Almajiri* schools (Odumosu et al 2013). State Implementation Committees were also set up and empowered by the National Committee on *Almajiri* Education to monitor *Almajiri* schools (Amoo 2018).

³² Basic education programming was scheduled for delivery to *Tsangayas* and *Ile-kwewu* (Yoruba Qur’anic Schools). Government support for community-owned *Tsangayas*, *Islamiyyah* schools, and *Tahfeez* primary schools.

³³ There are three models of construction and equipment of the *Almajiri* schools, namely Model I, Model II, and Model III. Model I schools involve the integration of traditional Qur’anic school within its original location. There are 101 Model I schools in the country. Model II schools are quite larger than Model I schools and were meant to accommodate more pupils. The 18 Model II schools spread across Nigeria were built to serve a group of Qur’anic schools within their respective states. Model III schools are pre-existing *Islamiyyah* and *Ma’ahad* schools supported in terms of rehabilitation and provision of additional infrastructure.

³⁴ To empower teachers the National Commission for Colleges of Education was to facilitate professional development and certification in this sub-sector (UBEC 2010).

As a strategy, such comprehensive efforts are impressive, and in theory appear to address many technical criticisms of earlier educational failings. Yet, because the number of *Almajiri* students outside of formal education has remained largely unchanged since these programs have been implemented, scepticism is required. In speaking with interview and focus group respondents throughout Borno, Kano, and Nasarawa a majority (56.8%) felt that this programming had generally been successful or at least partially successful.³⁵

This endorsement is however confined to isolated cases such as the largely prosperous integrated school program in Warawa, Kano, which highlighted a clearly visible quality of education in the students graduating from the school. The school is also noted for the quality of formal, Qur'anic, and Islamic education they are imparting to their students. The equipment and teaching quality have also added to the value that people see in integrated education. Many interviewed parents in Borno and Kano had initial reservations towards the mix between formal and Islamic education but were vocal in clarifying that the integrated approach can yield the desired result if it is adequately planned and delivered.³⁶ The *Almajiri* Model School pilot project in Warawa, for example, worked so well that there is a long list waiting for space to enrol into the school. The approach is “very effective”, added Islamic Scholar Isamiyya Ungoggo.

The problem, however, is that such potential was never pursued in earnest at scale at both the federal and state levels. Nationally, while considerable money was invested, the Ministry of Education admitted its engagement was only expected to provide support for 10,000 out-of-school students (Ministry of Education 2014: 63). Contrasted with the 10 million children in need, even at an early stage, this raises questions of commitment. In addition to providing limited leadership and financial support relative to the size of the multi-state challenge, the federal government also relinquished much of the considerable responsibility for the implementation and management of the initiative to individual states with little follow-up.³⁷

Localised leadership, while historically successful through traditional governance, experienced less contemporary success across state administrations. In the commonly shared perspective of a key informant in Nasarawa: “Up until now, these schools have not taken off. They were built, I think, with the intervention of the federal government, and they are supposed to go hand in hand with the Islamic education and the formal education so that they [*Almajiri* children] will come up as useful members of the society, but because there is a lack of political will, nothing is happening. The schools are lying there, the structures are there but nobody is in the school. So, with regards to the government, I don't think they are making any effort towards that.” Narrowing the focus, criticism of state leadership more specifically included a failure to recruit and manage staff, publicise relevant opportunities, maintain facilities, and (as will be discussed later) neglecting the mandating of school feeding. Criticism of staffing more specifically included both a failure to recruit and deploy staff to the *Almajiri* Model Schools, recruiting non-Muslim teachers, and the non-integration of *Mallamai* into the program. The latter issues were widely cited in focus groups as “endangering to the program” and a “great concern to the success of the program” respectively. Further hindering the program was a widespread lack of awareness. Even within the *Almajiri* community, one out of three respondents surveyed were unaware that this flagship program – or any other – had ever existed.³⁸

³⁵ Comprising the 56.8%, 35.5% felt that it had been successful, while 21.3% opined it was partially successful.

³⁶ Two schools located in Shehuri and Mashamari, Borno also hold the same level of attraction due to similar qualities. But the Borno schools appear to be facing more maintenance issues than the Warawa School in Kano.

³⁷ For successful implementation of the program, states were expected to: 1) adopt and replicate the program, including the construction of *Almajiri* Model Schools, 2) recruit and deploy teachers to these schools, 3) integrate *Mallamai* and proprietors into the program, 4) adopt appropriate mechanism for the enrolment of *Almajiri* pupils into these schools, 5) provide school uniforms to the enrolled pupils, 6) include feeding as a retention strategy, 7) maintain the infrastructural facilities, and 8) ensure the sustainability of these schools (Odumosu et al 2013).

³⁸ A majority of respondents (66.2%) indicated that they are aware of the *Almajiri* Model Schools program, while 33.8% said they were not.

Inquiring if he was aware of any *Almajiri* intervention, Sheikh Bakura Addusaawi in Kano commented: “I have never heard of such. Never! If there has been any, I suppose I should have heard of such cases because I have relations with most of the *Almajirai* and teachers.” This sentiment was more widely shared by an Islamic teacher in Kano who added: “I am not aware of any interventions so I can’t say if they are successful or not.”

As interview respondents clarified, being new initiatives, these schools are not very widely known except where the pilots are situated. Within this wider uncertainty was the more consistent concern over facilities falling into disrepair, as students, teachers, communities, and even state governments have abandoned many of the schools that are now “broken down.”³⁹ As was repeatedly mentioned by those familiar with *Almajiri* Model Schools, even the most cursory visit demonstrates poor quality and incomplete buildings, broken water systems, and an absence of computers and lab equipment. While quality of the schools varies, concerns over quality and maintenance were widespread.⁴⁰

In considering such criticism, perhaps most striking was the widespread feedback shared when respondents from *Almajiri* communities throughout Borno, Kano and Nasarawa were asked to mention the reasons why they think the interventions and government efforts have failed in improving the *Almajiri* system, with the most significant reason offered being that they have not “felt or experienced” any of the interventions. Instead, many commonly believed the programming was utilised for shorter-term political purposes at the expense of empowering *Almajirai* children and *Mallamai*, until they were conveniently abandoned. Paraphrasing the critique of numerous interview and focus group participants, the government lacks good intention, so they always fail. Such understandable pessimism, while largely speculative, is not without support. Anecdotal accounts of ‘ghost’ teachers and ‘phantom’ projects used to pilfer education funding, in concert with documented cases of state-level politicians rebuffing federal educational funding, are widespread (Vanguard 2019, 2020b, 2020c). In response to N60 billion (\$156 million) in federal education funding being disregarded by 33 states between 2011 and 2016, the Executive Secretary of Universal Basic Education Commission Dr. Hamid Bobboyi lamented the “stacks of money in the commission waiting to be accessed” (Vanguard 2020a).

Regrettable setbacks aside, the successes of this engagement should nonetheless not be overlooked. Several states embraced the opportunity and well-run *Almajiri* Model Schools resulted in public eagerness to enrol their children as spaces become available.⁴¹ The failure, in turn, appears to be not in trying to modernise *Almajiri* education, but that the federal – and especially state – governments stopped prior to wider success.

School feeding

A second flagship program with direct relevance to *Almajiri* children is governmental school feeding. As highlighted in the original framework of the *Almajiri* Model Schools program, school feeding is an essential component of increasing enrolment in formal education and addressing the more general basic needs of vulnerable children. This includes the 10 million *Almajirai* as well as the estimated 40% of Nigerian school children who go to school each day hungry. With the third largest population of chronically undernourished children in the world, the challenges require considerable attention. After an initial attempt to address this concern in 2005, a re-designed program was launched in 2016.

³⁹ See also Amoo 2018

⁴⁰ Amoo (2018) described how some of the schools visited in Sokoto, Katsina, Kaduna and Kano have not been managed well, while other schools in the same states and Zamfara State are making significant progress including replication (Odekunle 2013: 52).

⁴¹ Long waiting lines for admission into schools in Tsakuwa and Ganduje, Kano, were specifically mentioned.

The National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSF) is part of a N500 billion (\$1.3 billion) funded Social Investment Programme to tackle poverty and improve the health and education of children and other vulnerable groups (Cummings and Kulutuye 2017). The HGSF aims to provide free school meals with food procured from local smallholder farmers, ultimately 1) improving child nutrition, 2) increasing school enrolment and completion, and 3) strengthening local agricultural economies. When fully realised, the HGSF aims to support states in collectively feeding 24 million school children – which would make it the largest school feeding program of its kind in Africa. Notably to this research, HGSF also explicitly includes *Almajirai* students in its mandate, starting with the participation of *Almajiri* Model Schools and the expectation to subsequently include less formalised *Tsangayas*.

After little more than a year, initial results show potential. Food has apparently been procured from over 10,000 local farms and prepared by 90,670 cooks, ultimately feeding over 8.5 million students daily in 46,000 public primary schools throughout 24 states (Nda-Isaiah 2018).⁴² Reviewing the program more narrowly through the *Almajiri* community, results were similarly positive, yet reservations remained. A strong majority of *Almajiri* children (75.7%) were aware of HGSF, which makes it the most prominent of any intervention involving the *Almajirai*. Awareness proved even higher in Nasarawa (92%) and Kano (80%), highlighting both the wider significance of food programming, as well as the impact the ongoing insurgency has had on interventions in Borno.⁴³ The notoriety of HGSF has subsequently led to a sharp rise in enrolment into HGSF-affiliated schools throughout the *Almajiri* community. As one Kano interview respondent described the success in Kano: “I know the feeding program made a lot of parents enrol their children in school. It reduces the need to beg for food.” When asked if HGSF and school feeding more generally were effective, 56% stated they were partially or fully successful, while 31.2% claimed they were not.⁴⁴ The most common criticism on why *Almajirai* found fault with formalised school feeding programs were based around its limited rollout to date. When queried, *Almajirai* and *Mallamai* repeatedly cited not having seen any school feeding program being undertaken in their areas. As one Islamic scholar clarified: “I am not aware of current interventions. I have heard of the feeding program. I have never seen it though.” In theory, the HGSF shows promise and is largely welcomed by the *Almajiri* community, but appears to be limited in practice.

The second notable concern respondents shared was the likely politicisation of the school feeding programs. A tangible example cited by respondents was state-level school feeding in Kano, which is managed by the Community Reorientation Committee (CRC) that reports directly to the office of the governor. Their fear is by aligning programming with specific politicians and not policy best practice, the future of such programming would be uncertain.⁴⁵ An interview respondent in Nasarawa highlighted widely shared concerns over political manipulation at both the state and federal levels: “There was a time the then Governor of Nasarawa State, Abdullahi Adamu, introduced feeding program in Nasarawa State. It started well but at the end of the day, politics came in and it collapsed. Now, they said the federal government introduced [a school feeding program] and before long, you will be hearing of a lot of crises all over the state about how those children are fed.” Further clarifying why such pessimism was so widespread, another respondent said: “The people employed to cook and feed these pupils are politically selected. The supervisors or the officers appointed to monitor and regulate this feeding program were also politically appointed. Therefore, everything will have been politicised and due to greediness, in both the supervisors or the regulators and the cooks, we find the children are underfed. And if the government continues like this, their program and policies will never go a long way.” By promoting short-term patronage over longer-term investments in development, concern was raised that the HGSF program will fail as many before it have done.

⁴⁴ Of the 56%, 34% deemed school feeding programming as successful, while 22% deemed it partially successful.

⁴⁵ The school feeding program in Kano was launched during the second tenure of Governor Rabi’u Musa Kwankwaso and its political undertones led the administration of Governor Abdullahi Umar Ganduje to suspend the program until 2016 when it was re-launched under new patronage.

Recalling criticism that the effective exclusion of *Mallamai* in *Almajiri* Model Schools reduced the initiative's potential success, similar concerns have been raised anecdotally with school feeding. In theory, states have long known *Mallamai* are central to the success of supporting *Almajiri* children. This is highlighted by the Kano state government providing farm inputs to *Mallamai*, as well as the Borno state government providing monthly stipends to *Mallamai*.⁴⁶ Yet, with only 76% and 64% of educators familiar with each respective program, effective inclusion of *Mallamai* seems to exist in theory, rather than practice. Repeated concerns were raised by respondents that a failure to include them in school feeding schemes could similarly sabotage the efficacy of the initiative by alienating those gatekeepers central to reaching already marginalised *Almajirai*. As a young *Almajiri* critiqued in Kano: "They don't involve the *Mallamai*" and "that is why their projects always fail." A community leader in Borno reiterated this concern, recalling an earlier experience when "food was shared with *Almajirai* but not *Mallamai*. *Mallamai* were hungry, so they took the food away from *Almajirai* for themselves." As a Borno *Mallam* confessed in a focus group discussion, "*Mallamai* need to have few personal problems before intervention can be successful in his *Tsangaya*." While the merits of the contemporary *Almajiri* system often defy consensus, attempts to address child malnutrition in isolation from the larger framework is often prone to challenges.

Looking back over the past decade, it is important to acknowledge several notable approaches sponsored by the Nigerian government engaging marginalised *Almajirai*. Schemes including UBE and HGSF were initiated with meaningful attention and resources to improve the prospects of all Nigerian children. Unfortunately, such efforts have failed to tangibly reduce the number of *Almajirai* who consequently often remain on the street begging. As a key informant shared his perspective: "Based on what we've heard happening in Kaduna, Kano, and probably Jigawa, the feeding program is a very nice and laudable program. This makes issue of enrolment, retention, and completion of primary school easy because in most cases, [children] know that they will be given food and that will help a lot." In theory, the approach appears successful. In practice, however, little is noted. As Abdulkarim continued sharing his direct observations in Nasarawa: "I learned recently they brought in the idea of school feeding, and some women were contacted to supply such food to particular primary schools, but up to this moment I have not heard of any movement again. They have not started the feeding program yet. Probably funds have not been made available to the women to start the feeding." The tradition of not following through on such programming is unfortunate as the setbacks mentioned here do not erase the subtle successes observed within *Almajiri* Model Schools and HGSF when done right. Integrating Qur'anic and formal education, especially when incorporating school feeding and *Mallamai* as part of the solution, offer theoretical potential moving forward.

Community-led interventions

Building from a longstanding tradition of informal cooperation, in concert with, as of yet, unproven governmental assistance, local initiatives remain an enduring source of support for the *Almajiri* community. The two most notable interventions of relevance to meeting the basic needs and long-term empowerment sought by *Almajiri* children are community-based education and Islamic alms.

Appreciating the earlier potential for reform within traditional *Almajiri* education, prominent local stakeholders long ago took issue with the enduring narrative that Muslim students learn best when they are away from the familiarity of home. Also believing there was a contemporary need for a balance between Islamic and formal education, influential community members throughout northern Nigeria set up *Islamiyyah* schools in their homes and neighbourhoods.

⁴⁶ Formally in Borno, the 1,270 *Mallamai* registered with the state each receive a stipend of N3,000 (\$8.40) per month. It is such low levels of assistance which explain why an estimated 1,000 *Mallamai* operate independently of the Ministry of Religious Affairs as there is little tangible benefit to engaging the government.

Defined as a format that combines elements of traditional curriculum with educational models inspired by formal and Arab models, *Islamiyyah* schools aimed to honour Islamic education, while providing a pathway for religious students to engage with formal schooling.⁴⁷ First expanding as graduates of colonial Arabic training inaugurated their own schools, the *Islamiyyah* system proliferated throughout the middle of the 20th century and partly met the popular demand for mass education. Earlier research has shown that there has traditionally been no formal organisation of *Islamiyyah* schools in northern Nigeria and in turn quality and style vary (Shehu 2002, 2003; Umar 2003a, 2003b). Within such variety, most curricula have nonetheless comprised 30-50% Islamic themes and 50-70% formal content, with secular coursework traditionally more prevalent in urban communities (Abbas 2001). A further trend within *Islamiyyah* schools, while again not universal, is generally better functioning facilities. One prominent example is the Dantata *Islamiyyah* School in Kano.

In discussing the merits of *Islamiyyah* schools with the *Almajiri* community, results are promising, but evidently limited in potential against cost and the current scale of need. Interview respondents from the *Almajiri* communities of Borno and Kano were widely complimentary, citing the schools' more reliable, better coordinated, and integrated method of learning not just the Qur'an but also additional forms of Islamic knowledge among "lower-middle" class families. The quality of graduates produced by *Islamiyyah* schools appears to be much higher than that of *Tsangayas*, and notably achieved in less time. One policy maker interviewed used this success to question the ongoing merit of the *Almajiri* system: "It was useful before because Islamic knowledge was not readily available in the olden days but now there is an *Islamiyyah* everywhere." Yet this quality comes with a literal cost, as *Almajiri* focus groups were quick to point out *Islamiyyah* schools expect higher fees to cover larger expenses for better facilities and improved teaching. This tangible concern, in concert with enduring rural scepticism at abandoning Qur'anic recitation, results in *Islamiyyah* schools often not being seen as a "good" alternative to conventional *Tsangayas*. This suggests that while evidently successful in more urban communities, *Islamiyyah* schools' primary role will continue as a niche solution that nonetheless helps inform wider solutions.

A second local intervention of note is *Zakat*. This well-known categorisation, grounded in community support for religious education and those sacrificing to pursue it, locally includes resources as varied as food leftovers to *Tsangaya* infrastructure support.⁴⁹ While many ad hoc offerings are unpredictable and extended only when available, others are more deliberate. Examples cited by respondents include basic needs support, with community members financing bore holes for better access to drinking water and construction of toilets to help with hygiene. The principal of an *Islamiyyah* in Kano highlighted how the most common items donated by the community for *Almajirai* are food and clothing. Alternatively, community support can often take credit for larger contributions as well. As a *Mallam* in Maiduguri showed off his *Tsangaya*: "Everything you see here – the shelter, the latrine – were built by people from the community." Other contributions frequently include fiscal and political support on behalf of the *Almajiri* community. The SWOT Foundation has, for example, provided financial assistance to *Tsangayas*, as well as utilising its connections to the governor's office to advocate for *Almajiri* issues. The Zakat Commission, established across 12 northern states to collect alms from the public for distribution to the indigent constituents, is a further example of more organised efforts to utilise community support in a more coordinated fashion.

In reviewing the efficacy of community-based altruism, respondents were effusive in recognising the help such offerings provide, while also acknowledging the short-term nature of most initiatives. These largely uncoordinated efforts, while enduringly welcome, were deemed best mostly as a temporary solution until longer-term assistance is organised.

⁴⁷ *Islamiyya* or *Nizamiyya*, which derives from the Arabic *Nizam* (system).

⁴⁸ The International Institute of Islamic Thought Nigeria canvassed a sampling of 50 earlier *Islamiyyah* schools and found a wide variation in subjects and integration (Abbas 2001).

⁴⁹ One of the two forms of alms within Islam is *Zakat* (obligatory alms). A common interpretation of this almsgiving is that 2.5% of one's income, and wealth and between 5 to 10% of one's harvest, should be given to the poor and needy (Weiss 2007).

The prevailing hope amongst *Almajiri* respondents is that more systemic solutions will gradually shift support away from the convenience – and, at times, the political nature – of palliative patronage, and alternatively prioritise the longer-term wellbeing of students through empowering, sustainable approaches.

While neither the niche *Islamiyyah* schools nor munificent *Zakat* in themselves offer a tenable solution to what at 10 million has now become a national challenge, such local initiatives do offer several notable insights. By highlighting the durable clout of charitable giving, even amidst a contemporary setting, and the more recent success of merging Islamic education with more modern forms of pedagogy, the enduring significance of religious tradition is emphasised, while yet again signalling an important opening for further reform.

Emerging approaches

While long marginalised by both public services and mainstream development schemes, street children are garnering greater attention in recent years. This notably includes the *Almajirai* in Nigeria as the relevance of vulnerable children to insurgent recruitment and Covid-19 transmission, amongst other apprehensions, have prompted increasing interest. Several relevant approaches confronting the concern are consequently emerging beyond governmental schemes and traditional giving that are worthy of note. These include integrated Qur'anic education, targeted vocational training, and renewed advocacy for child protection.

Integrated curricula

Building from the innovation of earlier efforts to develop pioneering *Islamiyyah* schools, integrated Qur'anic education (IQE) is a similarly broad categorisation that, at a minimum, encompasses fusing routine secular skills alongside traditional Islamic pedagogy. Following the relative success of such integration, many stakeholders are taking a greater interest in developing their own IQE programming, at times complemented with vocational skill building. In northern Nigeria, this prominently includes the Northern Education Initiative (NEI) which aimed from 2010 – 2014 to complement Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) and the National Benchmark for Nonformal Education with IQE.⁵⁰ In particular, it emphasised an accelerated learning program that taught literacy, numeracy, and life skills within an Islamic educational framework. NEI also provided vocational training in different marketable trades (e.g. embroidery, knitting, and pomade making) to incentivise 3,500 students to remain enrolled in the basic skills program through completion.⁵¹

Similar efforts have expanded upon NEI's work, first with the *Almajiri* Skills Training Pilot in Northern Nigeria and the subsequent Increasing Economic Opportunities for Marginalised Youth in Northern Nigeria (Mafita).⁵²

⁵⁰ The Northern Education Initiative was a USAID-funded education project implemented by Creative Associates International from 2010 to 2014. Nigeria's National Policy on Education and the National Benchmark for Nonformal Education emphasises: 1) enhancing political will among policymakers at all levels to commit resources for integrating core subjects into Qur'anic schools, 2) increasing awareness among stakeholders on the importance of the integration program and reducing resistance through sensitisation, advocacy, and community dialogue, 3) creating an enabling environment for learning in Qur'anic schools, 4) increasing interagency linkages and partnerships between Government, Civil Society Organisations, and other development partners working towards achieving Education for All goals, 5) empowering learners with vocational and life skills for their socioeconomic well-being, and 6) increasing enrolment, retention, and completion of quality basic education of learners.

⁵¹ Of similar success is the eTrash2cash program that, while focusing more on entrepreneurship training, nonetheless underscores the importance of connecting programming to tangible benefits (Abdullahi 2020).

⁵² The *Almajirai* Skills Training Pilot in Northern Nigeria was funded by DFID and managed by Mott MacDonald from 2013-2014, while the subsequent Increasing Economic Opportunities for Marginalised Youth in Northern Nigeria was also funded by DFID, yet managed by Adam Smith from 2015-2020.

Mafita in particular targeted *Almajirai* and other vulnerable youth “who have been prevented from accessing basic education, skills development and employment opportunities due to a specific set of socio-economic barriers and stigmatisation rooted in values, cultural and religious beliefs.” The focus of Mafita, however, placed greater emphasis on vocational curricula as it partnered with the government to promote specialised “workspace guidelines” in lieu of more basic skills curriculum. The underlying strategy was by teaching skills of relevance to the local economy, 50,000 marginalised youth would be empowered through economic advancement, yielding personal and community-wide dividends through a reduction of grievances and improved social cohesion (UK FCDO 2020).⁵³

The final emerging educational program of note is the more recent Partnership for Learning for All in Nigerian Education (PLANE).⁵⁴ The largest component of a more comprehensive basic education program in Nigeria, the PLANE program is collaborating with governmental and nongovernmental (NGO) stakeholders relevantly including Plan International, Save the Children, Street Child, and Unicef to improve teaching, school quality, education management, and efficient delivery of education.⁵⁵ By focusing on curricula development, integrating literacy and numeracy into Qur’anic education, teacher training, providing basic facilities, and requisite community engagement, its aim is to improve learning for an estimated 1.5 million children in northern Nigeria in a more holistic manner.⁵⁶

The efficacy of such early efforts is as of yet difficult to evaluate comprehensively. While allowances and later review are required to better assess lasting success, several relevant themes are worth noting. The first is that while Nigeria has long been contending with – at 13.2 million – the highest number of street children globally, none of the *Almajirai* interviewed during this research could cite any outside intervention that had made a tangible difference in their lives. The only disconcerting reference to international stakeholders that was mentioned repeatedly was how international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) and national stakeholders would often consult the *Almajiri* community on need, with no subsequent follow-up. Respondents admitted they had no idea if planning was still ongoing – including for assessments started a decade earlier – or if programs had ever been implemented. One *Mallam* in Borno commented “we only hear stories of INGO interventions,” while a young *Almajiri* boy in Maiduguri concluded “INGOs don’t see programs targeting *Almajirai* as valuable.” It is subsequently a positive step forward that more international stakeholders are more actively engaging the issue, yet such efforts must strive for greater impact as earlier incomplete efforts have only added to *Almajirai* skepticism and perceptions that they are routinely abandoned.

More contemporary efforts, while isolated, do however hold promise. The aforementioned programming involving IQE and vocational training are especially relevant as they tie directly into earlier successes and the more recent concerns raised by *Almajiri* respondents. NEI’s experimentation into fusing together IQE and vocational training was largely validated as effective, while increased coordination and local empowerment was also emphasised as best practice.⁵⁷

⁵³ In 2017 Mafita targeted a net increase of 26,262 full time jobs, 21,789 self-employed positions equivalent to full time, and assistance to 23,500 micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises by 2021 (UK FCDO 2020).

⁵⁴ The Partnership for Learning for All in Nigerian Education, a DFID program running from 2019 – 2027, is implemented by the British Council, Palladium International, Unicef, and USAID, amongst other contractors.

⁵⁵ The DFID-funded North East Transition to Development (NENTAD) program, while more comprehensively approaching wider developmental challenges in Borno and Yobe from 2018-2026, apparently also includes Plan International engaging 15 IQE centers targeting 3,000 children introducing formal education using the Teaching at the Right Level methodology to promote numeracy and literacy, per Plan International.

⁵⁶ The project has developed Accelerated Basic Education Programme (ABEP) curriculum in conjunction with Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), a body in charge of developing Curriculum for basic and secondary education in Nigeria. Facility improvements include the provision of temporary learning spaces (canopies) and sanitation.

⁵⁷ The establishment of Steering Committees, Technical Working Groups, Center-Based Management Committees, and inter-ministerial collaboration were cited as relevant best practice.

Mafita, on the other hand, was less successful as an economic downturn exposed the vulnerability of empowering vulnerable children with narrow skill sets that become redundant if labour markets have no capacity to absorb them. Higher unemployment and a reduced likelihood that state governments would maintain vocational training for marginalised children led to the program being discontinued prior to completion. PLANE, alternatively, appears better positioned to build upon the earlier potential of *Almajiri* Model Schools, *Islamiyyah* success, and NEI progress but faces similar challenges. Partners are subsequently working with religious leaders and embracing IQE within *Tsangayas* and Qur'anic centers to better overcome community scepticism towards formal education. Efforts are also underway for the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Religious Affairs, and SUBEB to recognise those who finish IQE at sixth grade as qualified to enrol in junior secondary school. While questions remain, including the potential impact from such a small intervention to the quality and professionalism of utilising volunteers as teachers of basic skills, to logistical challenges involving basic needs, it is a promising step to empower vulnerable *Almajirai*.⁵⁸ As an *Almajiri* student from Kano endorsed the prospect of caring for himself, “To have formal education and business training alongside *Tsangaya* training will truly transform the *Almajiri* system.”

Advocating for child protection

A second arguable intervention of increasing relevance is advocating for child protection. Commonly defined as preventing and responding to violence, exploitation, and abuse against children, it also includes “harmful traditional practices” routinely associated with the contemporary *Almajiri* system (Unicef 2020). The mainstay of child protection is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) that outlines the fundamental rights of children, including the right to be protected from exploitation. Nigeria’s Child Rights Act (CRA) (2003) codified this convention, yet just as the Universal Basic Education Law (2004) remains far from comprehensively implemented, the CRA remains largely irrelevant in northern states.

With little effective state oversight, specialists, including Unicef’s Child Protection Program, take on greater relevance. Its national focus is on strengthening child protection systems to prevent and respond to any child experiencing violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation in Nigeria. Hence, while marginalised *Almajiri* children may technically be identified for support, the current approach does not prioritise any one vulnerable or at-risk child over another. Due to a lack of available resources, Unicef’s child protection focus is instead based geographically, which, until 2019, excluded northern states. Examples of recent work in the North include the Covid-19 response with Child Protection Officers provided technical guidance for the safe quarantine and deportation of children from one state to another. Nascent efforts also include ongoing advocacy with governors’ offices and Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development to link vulnerable children with educational programming and cash transfer programs. As is similar to every other multilateral initiative, no *Almajiri* respondent interviewed had benefitted from – or was even aware of – any such advocacy programming.

More promising are innovative independent efforts that, while still early on, build on the relative success of local interventions. The first notable advocacy effort to date was Creative Associates in 2014 promoting the concept of “compassionate communities” to encourage awareness and sensitivity to help *Almajirai* children avoid stigmatisation and strengthen the community networks they rely on. The media too has become an emerging actor, including Arewa24 television and numerous radio stations across the north promoting sensitisation to the challenges facing the *Almajirai*. An *Almajiri* youth from Kano agreed, emphasising advocacy has “a big role to play in making people understand the problems of *Almajirai*.”

⁵⁸ For example, Plan International is implementing IQE in five Local Government Areas (LGAs) with 25 *Tsangayas*, while Save the Children is implementing IQE in Four LGAs with 16 *Tsangayas*.

Most recently, a collection of Nigerian NGO and INGO partners united to specifically advocate for *Almajiri* issues. This association is loosely led by *Almajiri* Child Rights Initiative, and further supported by Action Aid, Plan International, Street Child, and Unicef, but at its core is being pushed by a passionate group of individuals with a familiarity with the issue and relevant stakeholders. Prioritised interventions include creating a platform specifically tailored around challenges facing vulnerable *Almajirai* (to differ from the more generalised Unicef child protection system), as well as promoting a legal framework better advocating for child rights in northern states. But, as reinforced by Sheikh Bakura Addusaawi, although engaging the legislature over interventions is important, “it is our view that the advocacy should start with communities. Law making may not be the very first starting point.” While even those more established advocacy campaigns are difficult to evaluate, such early efforts deserve praise for addressing the stigmatisation of *Almajiri* children and embracing community-based leadership to influence change.

Lessons learned

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The *Almajiri* community, an enduring pillar of northern Nigeria, requires new support to confront rapidly evolving contextual challenges. While varying endeavours over the last century have attempted to build on Qur’anic recitation or provide formal alternatives, it is evident most efforts have to date proved inadequate to the scale of the challenge. The number of marginalised *Almajiri* children remains stubbornly high, as does their desperation and vulnerability as they attempt to meet the most basic of needs. While debate endures over the merits of reforming or replacing the *Almajiri* system, several constructive themes from ongoing efforts have been observed that would be prudent to incorporate into future solutions.

The first trend that respondents, young and old, were consistent in articulating is that Islamic education and traditional guidance in and of themselves are not the inherent concern – the begging often associated with an overwhelmed *Almajiri* system is. A majority of current *Almajirai* interviewed valued their pursuit of Islamic knowledge as, amongst other qualities, it uniquely contributes to much-needed self-worth amidst a litany of dehumanising daily pressures grounded in a lack of public services. At the same time, those most familiar with the *Almajiri* system readily admit that it increasingly fails to meet its original intentions of empowering children. As a representative of the Council of Ulama acknowledged: “I would like to clarify that the current *Almajiri* system is not the ideal Islamic system which was practiced before. Begging and lack of oversight of the students have corrupted the system.” What results is less a universal disagreement over how children are supported, per se, and more a prioritisation that children inclusively receive the help they need. This apprehension is reflected by a diverse majority of stakeholders that admit to frustrations with the status quo and have affirmed a desire for change. The active participation of this wider cross section of actors is not only welcomed but essential to move this issue forward. From the centrality of *Mallamai* who hold disproportionate sway over access to marginalised children, to Islamic leaders whose endorsement is needed to legitimise any innovation, to wider society whose piety has sustained local communities for centuries, local stakeholders retain meaningful roles in northern Nigeria. Their active inclusion alongside more contemporary actors is widely seen in successful programming, and less common amongst those initiatives that failed.

A second notable theme observed throughout successful interventions was empowering marginalised students with a plurality of perspectives. While education is not a universal panacea in and of itself, schooling remains the most accessible path vulnerable children often have to formal oversight and public services. There is consequently widespread consensus that schooling bolsters the short and longer-term wellbeing of its students, with the subsequent question highlighting what type of guidance is best amongst entrenched approaches.

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As was repeatedly heard from *Almajiri* respondents throughout this research, educational initiatives embracing a plurality of perspectives were preferred. Integrating more mainstream scholastic approaches with Islamic tradition, for example, was noted to be distinctively successful with *Islamiyyahs*, community-supported *Almajiri* Model Schools, and NEI empowerment schemes. Alternatively, when programming remained uncompromising, be it Qur’anic recitation, the universal promise of secular education, or even the commercial emphasis of Mafita training, marginalised youth often remained disempowered. It should hence be unsurprising that *Almajiri* respondents themselves are consistent in praising the promise of Islamic traditions, the basic skills grounded in formal education, vocational training, and wider socialisation working in concert to best confront their own vulnerabilities. Those programs most effective at recruiting, retaining, and ultimately empowering marginalised students appear to reflect such diversity of perspectives inherent in northern Nigeria.

Finally, and perhaps most central to the challenge of child begging, was the importance of food within successful programming initiatives. As discussed, a strong majority (78.5%) of *Almajiri* respondents surveyed were consistent in articulating that they wandered the streets begging directly because of their need for food.⁵⁹ It is hence unsurprising that for any initiative to be successful, vulnerable children cannot be hungry. From the earlier success of *Tsangaya* farms to the more recent promise of school feeding programs, providing food and other basic needs to marginalised students and their teachers reduced begging and the vulnerabilities that accompany looking for food. Furthermore, by addressing such basic needs and being fed, *Almajiri* respondents were universal in their enthusiasm to refocus on education and longer-term empowerment, as they routinely aspire to be part of their own solution.

Embracing such insights, the following section outlines specific steps that can be taken to better empower vulnerable *Almajirai* moving forward.



Almajiri boys carrying bags in which they store items collected from the streets for sale in exchange of food or money

⁵⁹ Supporting current fieldwork was earlier commentary from the Borno State Sangaya Schools Association that an estimated 20-30% of *Mallamai* exploit the system primarily for their own benefit as they were described as “unscrupulous” (McGrann 2018).

SECTION 3.

Thematic and actor-specific recommendations

Thematic recommendations

The longstanding challenges facing vulnerable *Almajirai*, ranging from a lack of basic needs and educational support to subsequent exploitation, are not new phenomena. Repeated efforts have been made to reform this traditional educational system and the children within it. Unfortunately, wider challenges have systematically complicated the path forward, with demographic and economic trends putting pressure on the outmoded system; formal education facing its own challenges (i.e. limiting its viability as an alternative); and prominent stakeholders seemingly content with the status quo. While acknowledging contextual constraints, most relevant here are the lessons that have been gleaned from those participating directly in earlier and ongoing efforts to support *Almajiri* children. Building from criticism that ongoing educational approaches targeting the *Almajiri* community have often been unconnected to the challenges facing local communities, while ancillary programming intended to support basic needs was often short-term in nature, there is much room for improvement. This section therefore outlines broad areas in which interventions will mitigate the dangers of child begging by supporting a core aim to increase access to standardised educational programming in northern Nigeria. By including a diversity of local stakeholders and curricula, along with initiating a school feeding programme within more-formalised schooling, marginalised children will be supported to overcome their immediate and longer-term vulnerabilities. As history has repeatedly demonstrated locally, however, this remains an ambitious goal. Aspirations for universal primary education failed to meet the challenge in 1976, 1977, 1981, 1990, and again in 2004. While there have been more recent overall gains in enrolment, numbers of children entering primary school have fallen.⁶⁰ As the Nigerian Ministry of Education itself admits, there has been a general lack of enforcement of the UBE (2014).⁶¹ Many interim considerations consequently remain relevant while services are scaled up to accommodate the 10 million *Almajiri* children currently growing up beyond formal support.

Addressing legislative limitations

Firstly, it is necessary to confront the vulnerability that drives begging and child labour in northern Nigeria. However, declarative statements are not enough: the State must eschew overreliance on top-down declarations that will have at best limited local impact. At worst, such moves play a counterproductive role in further vilifying *Almajiri* children, and alienating community stakeholders who are integral to ensuring the success of longer-term solutions. Year after year, legislative initiatives theoretically aimed at supporting vulnerable children have, in isolation, routinely proved ineffective. This reality is reinforced when considering the largely inconsequential Child Rights Act (2003) that purportedly protects vulnerable children throughout Nigeria but has yet to be domesticated in northern states due to its political and religious salience.⁶² Relying on similar declarations alone holds little promise for tangibly improving the lives of marginalised *Almajiri* children.

⁶⁰ World Bank WDI 2020.

⁶¹ In its latest review of Nigeria's educational standing in 2014, UNESCO and the Federal Ministry of Education has concluded that although progress has been made in basic education, much more remains to be done, both in quantity and quality: participation in primary education is still low in comparison with primary school age population; the quality of the national school curriculum is undermined by the generally low quality of teachers who implement it, which translates into low levels of learning achievement; infrastructure, toilets and furniture are inadequate and in a dilapidated state; the system of collecting comprehensive, relevant data for planning is weak; there are social and cultural barriers that are hindering female participation; there is a lack of enforcement of the UBE Act 2004 on enrolment and retention (Federal Ministry of Education 2014).

⁶² Nigeria's Child Rights Act (2003) codified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990).

The suggested banning of the *Almajiri* system, for example, remains unrealistic in the absence of larger structural changes. Such standalone prohibitions would seemingly do little beyond pushing the *Almajirai* further into the margins of society where they face greater vulnerability to abuse. Future national policies should be pursued more selectively and implemented only in tandem with holistic efforts supporting *Almajiri* children.

A more viable and pragmatic alternative would be to selectively discourage the current *Almajiri* system from serving as a catch-all for marginalised children. This could entail, for example, prohibiting the most vulnerable Islamic students (or Qolo as the Hausa describe the youngest Qur’anic students from 4 to 13 years old) from travelling for religious education.⁶³ Prohibiting children under 14 from studying in distant institutions would not exclude them from Islamic education per se, but would require their schooling to remain within their local communities, keeping them in the vicinity of their homes.⁶⁴ This offers the joint advantages of the youngest *Almajirai* remaining closer to family oversight and support, while encouraging parents to take greater responsibility for their children and their education. Such an approach would also respect the traditional importance of *Almajirai*’s ‘searching for knowledge’ as older children could still travel farther afield and would be better prepared to do so. This alternative would help limit the number of vulnerable *Almajiri* currently overwhelming urban communities, while simultaneously respecting the time-honoured cultural institution and its relevant constituencies.

A second popular political refrain is simply to outlaw begging inherent in the contemporary *Almajiri* system. While research noted less concern over prohibiting more commonplace “professional” begging, the *Almajirai* require differentiation as they are widely seen by northern communities throughout this research as “beggars with a purpose.”⁶⁵ The determination and underlying desperation driving *Almajiri* begging are generally perceived in a different light, so challenging this cultural norm would not be a straightforward solution in itself. As highlighted earlier, programming offering food instead of money has faced problems, for its perceived disregard of the wider *Almajiri* tradition. In contrast, when more generous programming such as comprehensive feeding was proposed in tandem with legislation banning begging, there has been near universal will throughout the *Almajiri* community to abandon begging. To be both realistic and effective, any narrow prohibition against begging or other aspects of the *Almajiri* system would subsequently need to be implemented in parallel to proactive initiatives to support the wider needs of the community.

Strengthening local participation

A second recommendation of relevance over both the interim and longer-term is to strengthen inclusion and diversity of local oversight in guiding the wellbeing of marginalised children. Building from the relative success of traditional governance in guiding the earlier *Almajiri* system, a more inclusive selection of community stakeholders would bolster the relevance of subsequent programming. The need for wider participation is highlighted by the abandonment of selected *Almajiri* Model Schools in areas where local perspectives were shunned by state agencies, as well as past mistakes where earlier programming neglected to incorporate, for example, the timing of *Tsangaya* classes and the significance of older “blessed” buildings.⁶⁶ Such shortcomings are exacerbated by a larger bureaucratic disinterest failing to confront the scale of marginalised children.

⁶³ This would parallel Nigeria’s Young Person’s Act, which designates a child as an individual below the age of 14.

⁶⁴ Such a decree would notably only be feasible if enforced by urban *Mallamai* as well as often marginalised rural *Tsangayas* receiving resource support tied to higher educational standards to ensure rural families and students would comply with the approach.

⁶⁵ Contrasting with the *Almajiri*, *Mabarata* are an alternative tradition of professional beggars originally subsisting off pilgrims’ alms independent of any continuing education.

⁶⁶ Several *Mallamai* interviewed in Borno and Kano emphasised that many *Tsangayas* are perceived as blessed due to their longstanding tenures over decades. The *Mallamai* stated that building new facilities in other locations – even when granted from the government – was not an option for them or their students.



Almajiri children asking for leftovers at a food stall in Unguwar Gabas, Gezawa Local Government Area, Kano State

This includes various state and local governments cited for ignoring the *Almajirai* (Taiwo 2013), as well as further unwillingness to channel funding even when it has been allocated to support *Almajiri* children (Vanguard 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). In turn, local oversight is suggested as better acquainted with the challenges facing vulnerable children and their needs moving forward. While the composition of such local oversight is not best determined here, NEI's efforts at community engagement including Steering Committees, Technical Working Groups, Community Coalitions, and inter-ministerial working groups offer a thorough sampling of potential stakeholders.⁶⁷ The more recent community engagement from PLANE partners is similarly constructive.⁶⁸ The primary proviso from respondents' feedback is to ensure that any such administrators are familiar with the realities facing *Almajiri* children as well as their surrounding communities. Grounding oversight within local leadership increases the likelihood that enduring friction between traditional and reformist camps within the *Almajiri* community can be negotiated with greater credibility, as well as cultivating increased awareness and involvement throughout the community. Amongst other advantages, greater local involvement can highlight the vulnerabilities of students currently exposed to abuse and neglect and subsequently be better addressed. Finally, local oversight rooted in understanding of the *Almajiri* experience would be best positioned to monitor subsequent changes to *Almajiri* education and alter approaches as needed.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Creative Associates 2015

⁶⁸ Partners potentially include the Adult and Nonformal Education Agency (ANFEA), the State Agency for Mass Education (SAME), the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), and the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), as well as traditional leaders, Islamiyya administrators, *Mallamai*, *Almajirai* alumni, and local community groups of the highest standard to advocate on behalf of new programming. Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) is an umbrella group for the Nigerian Muslim community and is suggested as one of the central players as their membership consists of community leaders and members of government.

⁶⁹ Local oversight (traditional leaders) are suggested to maintain records of all *Almajiri* students and *Mallamai*, whether they receive funding or not.

Broadening educational empowerment

While strengthening local participation and oversight is of relevance to all potential programming, it is particularly constructive to support educational empowerment. As the contemporary *Almajiri* system has increasingly failed its longstanding tradition of caring for marginalised youth, education nonetheless remains the most widespread pathway to engage vulnerable children with public support. Building from this reality, it is important to incorporate research insights into future educational programming, including broadening curricula, increasing flexibility between varied institutions, and dramatically scaling up support for basic education.

Listening to the repeated comments of *Almajiri* students, it is clear that Islamic guidance, basic skills, and vocational training all play significant roles in youth empowerment. As noted earlier, ideologically narrow curricula are often limiting in terms of recruiting marginalised children and offer questionable relevance to later life. While the likes of Qur'anic recitation and vocational training alone both have their constituencies, the wider community preference is for a broader blend of basic skills, traditional guidance, and vocational empowerment. This theme is not new, with religion already a feature in public education, as well as *Almajiri* Model Schools, *Islamiyyahs*, and IQE programming highlighting the potential of broader curricula. Such educational initiatives have significant potential and should be embraced by development stakeholders as eagerly as they are welcomed by vulnerable students.

While a more comprehensive educational foundation offers advantages to marginalised students, further benefit would come from increasing access to alternative educational tracks. The value of such flexibility is underscored by the often-transient nature of youth in northern Nigeria, as well as the diversity of educational approaches. Believing that limited options are counterproductive to empower children, this research appreciates ongoing efforts to codify IQE and other non-formal educational approaches as a pathway towards further opportunities.⁷⁰ While not always universally consistent, certifying such efforts can serve as a powerful facilitation for less conventional students to continue on to join Junior Secondary School (and later satisfy the requirements of the Basic Education Certificate), or alternatively access vocational programming.⁷¹ While not legitimising the failings of the contemporary *Almajiri* system, the goal instead is to acknowledge less formal experiences as traditionally marginalised constituencies transition into more conventional support.

While community participation and curricula can be organised to better accommodate non-formal students, such an approach ultimately requires considerable governmental support to increase the capacity of the educational sector to provide support for 10 the million marginalised *Almajirai*. As the Ministry of Education admitted, its prior engagement targeting *Almajiri* was only expected to provide support for 10,000 out-of-school students, which reflects an ongoing lack of serious commitment (Ministry of Education 2014: 63). The subsequent Better Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA) is, however, more aggressively targeting 900,000 out-of-school children. Yet at BESDA's \$642 (N246,000) per student estimate, a further \$6 billion (N300 billion) in funding is required to adequately support all vulnerable *Almajiri* children (World Bank 2019).

⁷⁰ PLANE partners are currently engaging with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and SUBEB to recognise Qur'anic students as having received basic education. From this start it is suggested that wider IQE programming will increasingly be codified around standardised curricula with the Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council to ensure that *Almajiri* students receive the best of Qur'anic and basic education as well as the opportunity to pursue further formal education, if desired.

⁷¹ At the completion of ninth grade Nigerian students are awarded the Basic Education Certificate (BEC), also known as Junior School Certificate, based on their performance in final examinations administered by Nigeria's state governments.

The difficulty in financing the cost of universal education is further complicated by earlier bureaucratic bottlenecks. As highlighted by the failure of 33 states to access N60 billion (\$156 million) in federal educational funding from 2011 to 2016 due to governmental incapacity and political recalcitrance, greater flexibility is needed. The federal government's recent success in circumventing state matching requirements within the Universal Basic Education Act (2004) to push educational funding to states is welcomed.⁷² Such unique perseverance is not sound policy, however, and a more accommodating approach is suggested. One potential approach would be to embrace a more adaptable funding clearinghouse that highlights all available educational resources, as well as relevant community stakeholders that could reinforce the unique role state governments currently dictate as de facto gatekeepers. By pooling funding, including UBE block grants, Paris Club concessions, bilateral and multilateral donors, *Zakat* Committees, and individual stakeholders together with state funding, greater opportunities are attainable beyond the narrow rigidity of the Universal Basic Education Act (2004). If one stakeholder lacked the familiarity with a local initiative or the capacity to support its application for funding, for example, a complementary entity could offer further pathway to help overcome bureaucratic intransigence. Such costs and collaboration are admittedly not easy, however. To be successful, considerable and joint efforts are required.

Supporting basic needs

What is reinforced here is the candid rationale of *Almajiri* students clarifying they only beg, and subsequently endure abuse, because they are hungry. Alternatively, if they had food and other basic needs the vast majority would happily embrace the opportunity to plan for a more secure future. Therefore, beyond local participation, relevant skill-building, and expanded facilities, this approach fundamentally rests on school feeding initiatives and the successful provision of other basic necessities. Such insights are not new, with the federal government acknowledging such concerns (Federal Ministry of Education 2014).

Advocating empathy and inclusion

Addressing the basic needs of vulnerable children with the likes of school feeding programs is a straightforward approach to mitigate begging, while a more balanced skill-building through integrating basic, traditional, and vocational education better prepares current *Almajiri* students for more secure futures. Yet neither approach confronts the cumulative challenge of loneliness and stigmatisation. With millions of *Almajiri* having roamed the streets for decades with little to support them beyond their own wits, their protracted marginalisation is endemic. To confront this less visible – but no less real – crisis, a further effort is required to cultivate wider empathy and inclusion. Related efforts have been made, notably building community sensitisation around educational programming as highlighted by NEI's Community Coalitions programming.⁷³ However, the national scale of *Almajiri* children's marginalisation requires newer approaches to confront the profound psychosocial crisis. The opportunities within the dynamic nature of Nigerian society are endless. From a *Sadaqa* (charity) campaign to share a smile with an *Almajiri* children, to a *Nollywood-Kannywood* narrative illustrating the plight of street children, to radio broadcasts sharing the *Almajiri* perspective, what is paramount is that these neglected children experience greater inclusion in society.⁷⁴ While their current stigmatisation fuels isolation, it is hoped that a wider acknowledgement of their struggles might condition these marginalised children to more willingly engage with the aforementioned formal services as valued members of Nigerian society.

⁷² Section 2, Part III of the Universal Basic Education Act (2004) requires "For any state to qualify for the Federal Government's block grant pursuant to subsection 1(1) of this Section, such state shall contribute not less than 50 per cent of the total cost of projects as its commitment in the execution of the projects."

⁷³ NEI promoted the concept of compassionate communities to promote and champion caring for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). Applying a community-based approach, the NEI set up Community Coalitions to build programs that target whole communities to create within them an awareness and sensitivity for the needs of OVC to help these children avoid stigmatisation and to strengthen networks, systems, and institutions.

⁷⁴ After *Zakat*, *Sadaqa* (truth or honesty) is the second form of charity in Islam. As a very general term, this voluntary act of piety can encompass offering a smile, a glass of water, or countless other acts of kindness. *Nollywood* is the colloquial name given to the Nigerian film industry, while *Kannywood* is the northern Nigerian equivalent producing movies in Hausa.

Actor-specific recommendations

Nigerian federal government

The sheer scale of supporting an excess of 10 million traditionally marginalised street children is daunting, and in part explains why so few formal stakeholders actively engage with the issue. Yet, as the challenge grows by the day, there is little excuse for further delays, as firmly argued by the National Emergency Management Agency⁷⁵ (World Bank 2017: 83). The Nigerian federal government has a significant role to play in confronting this growing crisis. Nigerian law, including the Nigerian Free Universal Basic Education Act (2004), mandates that education is provided free of charge to every child of primary and junior secondary school age, including *Almajirai*. Beyond such legal requirements is the further shame of leading the world in out-of-school children, which reflects very poorly on the federal government's leadership (UNESCO 2020).

Thankfully, determined action can still make a meaningful difference in confronting this crisis, by continuing to scale up standardised education to better support marginalised children against more immediate and longer-term challenges. Yet, as the number of out-of-school children remains high, further leadership is required. This includes a recommitment to the larger aspirations of Universal Basic Education (UBE) and its more specialised *Almajiri* Education Program (2010), while incorporating lessons from earlier missteps. The strongest support for marginalised street children incorporates continuing to dramatically scale up formalised educational programming that actively consults local participation and incorporates community perspectives into facility management and skill-building. This includes the development of further infrastructure and welfare facilities to support educational programming in areas where children have been neglected, as well as endorsing updated forms of standardised education. While the uncoordinated nature of the contemporary *Almajiri* system has repeatedly failed to protect marginalised children, Islamic education and traditional guidance retain considerable pedagogical influence in northern Nigeria. The Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council should continue to work with a wide coalition of community stakeholders to create and certify effective schemes to accommodate those oriented toward traditional pathways deserving of standardised support.

While greater community involvement can bolster the success of school expansion and the relevance of skill-building, such longer-term approaches are compromised by the reality of hunger. While community-based food security programming is welcomed, of greatest relevance to marginalised *Almajirai* is the continued expansion of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme. The goals of this N500 billion (\$1.3 billion) Social Investment Programme are admittedly wider than marginalised children, but it serves as the most promising model to mitigate the primary driver of begging in northern Nigeria and encourage students to focus on their longer-term success. The federal government should actively strive to radically expand this and similar programs into traditionally underserved areas, including *Almajiri* Model Schools, *Islamiyyahs*, and any other qualifying schools that meet local standards.

As per the Universal Basic Education Commission (2010), a goal of the federal government is for the *Almajirai* to “participate effectively and meaningfully in the socio-economic and political life of the nation.” Towards this end, it is recommended that the federal government refrain from imposing any legislative fiat to scapegoat the *Almajirai* or other street children when politically convenient; this does little for the 10 million vulnerable children beyond adding to their discrimination. Any banning of the *Almajiri* system or prohibition against all *Almajiri* inter-state travel, as recently proposed, should be resisted. Previous efforts to vilify the *Almajiri* community has accomplished little beyond compounding the stigma associated with these vulnerable children and only increasing their marginalisation. If anything, the federal government should avoid wholesale injunctions and focus its legislative clout towards discouraging *Almajirai* aged under 14 from traveling beyond their home communities. More generally, the federal government is called upon to encourage the increased inclusion of street children into Nigerian society where they can be better supported.

The government should also ensure the proper enforcement of child protection legislation through the documentation, investigation and prosecution of exploitative *Mallamai* with sentences that reflect the severity of the crimes committed. This can only be achieved through enhanced collaboration with child protection actors, the Nigeria Police Force, Hisbah (Sharia Police), the National Judicial Council and the National Human Rights Commission.

Nigerian state governments

Nigerian state governments, as charged in the Constitution (1999), have a further responsibility to care for marginalised children. While northern states vary greatly in their experiences with street children and the provision of support services to the *Almajiri* community, there is a generalised concern that state-level governments are unable to meet the scale of the current challenge. Nonetheless, state leadership holds great value in bridging the specialisations of federal and community-level stakeholders and better coordinating the ongoing diversity of approaches. This includes updating federal stakeholders on the urgency of the issue, as well as its national consequences. State leadership is also well situated to coordinate and standardise community-perspectives into position towards meaningful action. SUBEB's established familiarity with formal education is needed in partnership with civil society groups, *Islamiyyahs*, and the *Almajiri* community itself to pragmatically expand oversight and standardise educational best practice. By collectively determining how to most effectively engage and empower marginalised children, federal support can be better guided towards fulfilling its mandate.

Nigerian civil society

Nigerian civil society has a valued role to maintain, and ideally expand, in supporting marginalised communities throughout northern states. While palliative community support has played an important role in helping *Almajiri* students and other vulnerable children endure difficult times over the years, more constructive leadership is needed in its ongoing contribution. As seen in previous interventions, the most powerful role local groups take on is guiding programming by channelling community-based insight. Be it earlier efforts developing *Islamiyyah* schools to more contemporary IQE programming, civil society stakeholders are at the forefront for developing best practice to confront local challenges. This familiarity is essential in bridging the ongoing divide between formal and traditional programming, which continues to hinder progress. By utilising such local awareness to clarify the challenges faced, and better determine the support and skills needed to successfully confront them, marginalised children are most likely to benefit from wider efforts to support them moving forward.

Beyond guiding current and ongoing programming, civil society is also uniquely positioned to both legitimise and advocate for wider initiatives. As repeatedly raised by respondents throughout this research, many approaches, no matter how promising, were often unknown of. The prospect of successfully enrolling 10 million marginalised *Almajirai* into more formalised support is based, to a great degree, on local groups engaging their wider communities.

International support

International stakeholders, including nongovernmental, bilateral, and multilateral institutions, have historically been less involved in *Almajiri* programming than other areas of need in Nigeria. While the wisdom of such neglect can be debated, there is little question that the 10 million children subsisting on streets of northern Nigeria raise a legitimate concern. Increasing interest and engagement from international partners on this issue is welcomed, including their ongoing involvement with educational reform as well as supporting local stakeholders in ensuring marginalised children are protected from exploitation and receive the support needed to address more immediate needs and advance over the longer-term.

The costs involved in supporting 10 million *Almajiri* children are considerable. Utilising BESDA's \$642 (N246,000) per student estimate, a further \$6 billion (N300 billion) in funding is required to adequately support all vulnerable *Almajiri* children (World Bank 2019).

While significant, such an expense is roughly equivalent to the total cost of the Humanitarian Response Plan in the northeast of Nigeria over recent years.⁷⁶ It would be wise to heed the National Emergency Management Agency's warning that if street children are not supported now, another conflict looms in 10-15 years (World Bank 2017: 83). International stakeholders would be wise to confront this unfolding crisis now prior to it becoming overwhelming.

Beyond material support, international stakeholders are needed to play an active technical role in supporting educational reform and the provision of basic needs to marginalised children. While local insights from community stakeholders remain indispensable to forging a pragmatic balance between traditional and formal approaches to education, international actors have a long history in standardising and scaling up programming. This is highlighted by a selection of international non-governmental organisations that is augmenting efforts to fuse Islamic and formal styles of education. By bringing together international expertise on basic education together with community traditions, local students benefit from the standardisation of an updated best practice. This pragmatic approach, at times accompanied with vocational programming, is proving to be the most appealing path towards engaging estranged children and families often sceptical of the cost and customs associated with public services. While the scale of such interventions is currently limited, the community acceptance of IQE, *Islamiyyahs*, and other collaborative efforts highlights a path forward. Such partnerships similarly reinforce the wider potential of international technical support augmenting community insights towards providing marginalised children with all their requisite basic needs.

A final role for international stakeholders is to help ensure marginalised children avoid their current exploitation and receive the ongoing help they require. While the case for the prioritisation of 10 million isolated children barely subsisting on the streets of Nigeria is self-evident, few institutions have answered the call. Over the last year, there has been increasing attention to Qur'anic students within the relevant Education and Child Protection Clusters, but more engagement is urgently needed. More recent developments also include *Almajiri*-centered advocacy groups emerging to raise wider awareness, which, while small, nonetheless deserve ongoing attention. Whichever stakeholders ultimately engage the issue, subsequent priorities should promote increased monitoring for abuse and exploitation and advocate for the inclusion of vulnerable *Almajiri* children in relevant programming. This includes *Almajirai* receiving their relevant share of UBE and school feeding support, as well as integration in regionally focused initiatives. Relief efforts in the North East that embrace displaced persons and host communities, while at the same time excluding vulnerable *Almajirai* furthermore, does little to help the longer-term stability of northern Nigeria. International stakeholders need to be leading the fight against isolating vulnerable children, not adding to their rampant marginalisation.

Next steps

The scale and complexity of such responsibilities is not insignificant. Confronting the largest group of marginalised children subsisting beyond formal support is not a simple task. This research nonetheless highlights promising programmatic developments that deserve attention. Broadening the selection of standardised educational services, augmented with comprehensive school feeding programs, for example, challenges the notion that child begging is a permanent fixture of northern Nigeria. In their own words, if the *Almajirai* are not hungry and are able to focus on their education, they can also help take charge of their own empowerment. In turn, CHRICED and ASI will lead initial efforts to advocate on behalf of the *Almajirai*. This will include continuing ongoing dialogue with the *Almajiri* community and its developmental partners until the most relevant stakeholders are identified and engaged to coordinate efforts moving forward, when Anti-Slavery International and CHRICED will transition to a supporting role more narrowly focusing on advocacy.

⁷⁶ See OCHA Financial Tracking Service.

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The Resource Centre for Human Rights & Civic Education and Anti-Slavery International would like to thank the US Government Bureau of Democracy, Rights and Labor for funding this research and report. The views expressed are those of Anti-Slavery International and its partners, and in no way reflect the opinion of the funder.



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