

THE ALMAJIRI EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA: COST AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the cost and challenges of the Almajiri system of education in Nigeria. The paper theoretically examines pertinent issues arising from its conduct and administration. Although the Almajiri system of education in Nigeria has attracted very large number of children in the Northern part of the country, it has not provided good prospects for these children's future. The cost implications of Almajiri system include human resources wastage, exposure of children to harsh environmental hazards, and deprivation of these children of parental care. The paper also highlighted on the major challenges to include illiterate teachers involve in teaching the children, lack of basic infrastructural facilities for learning, lack of planned curriculum, and poor professional handling of the pupils for effective learning. For this system of education to be productive in Nigeria, it should go through the rigours of planning education and be mainstreamed in the Nigeria educational system.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, educating the citizens of a nation remains the most vital strategy for the development of the society. Many studies on human capital development uphold that it is the human resources of a nation and not its capital or natural resources that ultimately determines the pace of its economic and social development (Nsubuga, 2008). When people are educated, their standards of living are likely to improve, since they are empowered to access productive ventures, which will ultimately lead to an improvement in their livelihood. Education has been described as an instrument and process that enables productive participation of people of all ages in all sphere of national development. It has been identified as a critical driving force for change in Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).

In spite of its crucial role in facilitating development, education in Nigeria has suffered neglect especially in terms of resources, planning, training the teachers, provision of infrastructural facilities, condition of service of its personnel, among many others. For education to achieve the desired objective of developing the needed human resources, it must be well planned and properly administered. This process of planning begins with identifying the needs, desires, aspiration and the goals of the people which the education is meant to serve.

Efficiency in education, according to Vasceam, Grumbe, and Parlea (2004), is the ability to perform well or to achieve a result without wasted resources, effort, time or money using the smallest quantity of resources available. The principles of educational planning must be strictly adhered to for any educational system to be meaningful. These principles of planning are planning of the curriculum which is the broad programme of activities designed by the government for schools in order to help achieve the general goals or objectives of education, methods of teaching which refers to the approaches adopted to impart the content of the subject matter to a learner, materials which are things to aid the interaction between the teacher and learner, teachers, condition of service, provision of infrastructure, and creating awareness of programme.

However, the formal education system including the UBE has suffered a lot of setbacks in the effort to achieve its set goals and objectives in Nigeria, in spite of the fact that it was subjected to the rigours of educational planning. It still has problems of inadequate funding, lack of provisions of resources in terms of infrastructure, teacher training, planning of curriculum and condition of service for its personnel.

One system of education that has suffered even greater neglect both by the public and private sectors in Nigeria is the *Almajiri* system of education. It is a system of education that has co-existed with the formal system of education for a long time. While the formal system of education has been subjected to the rigours of planning resulting in several reviews, its level of achievement of goals is minimal. The *Almajiri* system of education, which has not subjected itself to similar rigours of planning, will likely have more challenges than the formal system of education. It is expected that unless the *Almajiri* system of education undergoes the rigours of educational planning, it cannot inculcate in the recipients such knowledge and skills that will prepare them for productive living.

The government has made appreciable strives within its limited resources and powers to mainstream this *Almajiri* system system of education into the formal basic education system. Some of these ways include the reformation of malnourished and abandoned children, setting up of implementation committee on *Almajiri* education, and the integration of *Almajiri* system in the Universal Basic Education Scheme (UBEC, 2011). According to UBE (2012), the Federal Government of Nigeria has attempted to integrate the *Almajiri* into formal basic education through development and production of a National framework for the development and integration of *Almajiri* education in UBE programme as well as the development of an operational guideline for the implementation of traditional Tsangaya Qur'anic schools, Ma'ahad schools and *Almajiri* boarding schools. Furthermore, sensitization workshops for Islamic scholars on *Almajiri* education in Nigeria have been organized as well as partnerships with NGOs on how the *Almajiri* education can best be provided for realization of its set objectives.

The objective of these efforts is to grant access to *Almajiri* children of school age into the formal basic education. Another objective is to create awareness of the need for and canvassing acceptance and participation by the *Almajiri* so as to avert the attendant consequences of none, or low achievement of functional education. Unfortunately, these

efforts have not seemed to yield the desired result of achieving the aims and objectives of the *Almajiri* programme. Available evidences suggest that a worrisome 9.5 million of the 10 million out-of-school children are *Almajiri* (Abdulqadir, 2005). There is a great danger in leaving such a great number of children without functional education, which at the end will amount to a wastage of human resources. Furthermore, they will constitute a threat to, and drain the national development efforts of the nation. In addition to staking out the indices of under-development, it will negate Nigerian's attainment of Education For All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) among other notable international conventions and protocols.

Often time, the cost of implementing such redemptive programmes as mainstreaming the *Almajiri* system of education and indeed other disadvantaged groups of the Nigerian society into the UBE programme appears to be the most focus consideration of government, whose responsibility it is to provide quality education to its citizens (FGN, 2009). Little or no attention is paid to the attendant consequences of lack of, or low quality of functional education. It is widely held that, "if you think education is costly, try illiteracy: (Oyedele, 2002). This means that the cost which a nation will incur in managing an illiterate society will be greater than what it will require to provide quality education to the citizens of that nation.

This paper is therefore developed on the premise that if the Nigerian government and other stakeholders do not take seriously the responsibility of planning for, and providing quality education to the *Almajiri* and indeed other disadvantaged groups, it is incurring the attendant enormous cost of managing an emerging illiterate society.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES OF THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

Historians have traced the *Almajiri* system of education to the 11th century. The system started as a result of the involvement of Borno rulers in Quranic literacy. Over 700 years later, the Sokoto Caliphate was founded through an Islamic revolution anchored on the teaching of the Holy Qur'an. These two empires ran a similar Qur'anic learning system which over time became known as the *Almajiri* system of education (Abdulqadir, 2005).

Over the past few decades, the system has been overwhelmed, neglected, and abused (Christian, 2010; Abdullahi, 2011). This fact is collaborated by Abdullahi (2011) who says that Nigeria's *Almajiri* have been denied every single right enshrined in the child rights convention. Abdulqadir (2005) observed that the *Almajiri* system of education as being practiced today in the Northern Nigeria is a completely different system when compared to the form and condition under which it was operating and its output during the pre-colonial period. He further laments that the system has outlived its usefulness. This is because of the emergence of semi-illiterate Qur'anic teachers who use the system as a way to earn their living. The provision of the national policy on education stipulates that every child should be given quality basic education and equal opportunity in terms of education regardless of their setting (FGN, 2004). In an effort to capture the plight of the *Almajiris*, Abdullahi (2011) further lamented that the students experience utter deprivation and their appearance leave much to be desired. These children have now

become ubiquitous in almost all parts of the northern states. For the parents, the system provides an acceptable source of disengaging the excess children at home; for the authorities, it is a relief that they do not have to budget for about 10 million children destitute in Nigeria, which 9.5 million of them are the *Almajiri* living in northern Nigeria (Abdulqadir, 2005). For years now, the children and youths roaming the streets all in the name of acquiring education have been a source of concern for policy makers in Nigeria. The *Almajiri* falls in the categories of destitute children in Nigeria. They constitute the over 9.5 million street begging, maladjusted, aggressive violent ridden, and social neglects of northern Nigeria (Adetoro, 2010; Ahmed, 2007; Obioha, 2009)

The vulnerability of the *Almajiri* made them handy as they were already antagonistic to western culture and opposed to society which has failed to treat them well (Peace, 2012). Describing the activities of the *Almajiri*, Yahaya (2004) noted that the *Almajiri* are thought of as being pious pupils in search of knowledge but have turned out to be a social problem in the society. This is because begging for food took most of his time instead of learning. Consequently, Adetoro (2010) had warned that the *Almajiri* system of education could become a potential threat to Nigeria's national security if it is not harmonized with the formal Universal Basic Education system in the country. Education is particularly important to the *Almajiri* now because politicians, religious fanatics and terrorist groups have begun to exploit their vulnerability to threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria as one indivisible nation (Olagunju, 2012).

COST AND CHALLENGES OF THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Cost

The fact that *Almajiri* of school age go out begging to survive is not a necessary and intrinsic element of the system as a lot of alternatives abound. However, the complete negligence of the institution by elites and successive governments is worrisome. There is nothing wrong with being an itinerant scholar. Abdulqadir (2005) observed that a situation where a semi-illiterate mallam who, after harvesting his crops at the end of the raining season in the village, gathers children from his village and other surrounding hamlets and heads to the city is not too good. He further stressed the fact that in this situation, the Mallams or the Qur'anic teachers have no abode or job nor any means of livelihood when they get to the city. The upkeep of the Mallams in the city then depends on these kids who are forced into begging or doing menial chores. It is in the context of this scenario that we examine the cost of *Almajiri* education and highlight on the following.

Human resources are being wasted. Considering the fact that about 9.5 million children are out of school which 65% of them are *Almajiri* children (Tahir, 2011), if these children do not attend formal school to give them the opportunity to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills to contribute meaningfully to the society, then, human resources are being wasted. This confirms Nwosu (2000), who posits that Nigeria's most valuable asset is the versatile youths we have, who only need to have their energies harnessed and channeled to productive use. Qur'anic education alone without formal education does not usually provide the requisite skills and knowledge for the children to have

meaningful employment in any productive sector of the economy after graduation. The cost implication for the nation is that the exploitation of the economic potentials of these many Nigerians to enlarge the economic fortunes of the country is lost. Instead, the meagre resources that accrue to the nation is used to provide social services to the ever increasing population of *Almajiri* children (Abdulqadir, 2005; Adetoro, 2010, UBEC, 2012) whose economic viability is low.

Exposure to harsh environment hazard. The *Almajiri* form of education as is being practiced in Nigeria exposes children to harsh environment since they move about. Describing the activities of the Mallams as they move with these children, Ahmed (2012) noted that since the children do not stay with their parents, they are deprived of the opportunity to learn good behavior and attitude. Furthermore, because these children are deprived of their parental care and grow in a volatile environment, they can be deficient in moral virtues. This state of deprivation can expose and make them vulnerable to misguided members of the elites to create social disharmony within the society. The cost implications in such situations will involve that the meagre resources accruing to the nation that could have been used to develop the economic circumstances of the nation are used to contain the security threats posed by miscreants.

Children are deprived of some of their needs. The Mallam who cannot handle the functional needs of these children at this age are ill prepared to equip the learners with functional knowledge and skills, which leaves them deprived of competencies and ability to contribute to the economic development of the nation. Madaki (2007) posited that well structured ways to handle the needs of *Almajiri* is absent and they are left in the hands of the Mallams. These children are not only deprived of their needs but their right to good shelter, food, and clothing are also denied. These children are denied these basic things in life which make them to be regarded as second class citizens in their own country.

Children cannot be employed because they lack the qualification and training. The case of *Almajiri* is different because they do not attain or are not equipped through formal education or vocational training to derive the benefit of eking out a functional living in the city. Omolewa (2001) remarked that the business of education demands progressively trained individual with needed skills be employed in all sectors of the economy. This circumstance of the *Almajiri* undermines their ability to and limits their scope of contribution to national development.

CHALLENGES OF THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

The *Almajiri*, numbering over nine million children, are apparently growing by the day (Abdulqadir, 2005; Adetoro, 2010) and pose tremendous challenge to the attainment of Education For All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as other notable international conventions and protocols. The *Almajiri* constitute the largest group out of school children in Nigeria (UBEC, 2012). Neglecting this group, according to Modibo (2012), denies them their fundamental right and truncates the tapping of their innate potentials, thereby jeopardizing Nigeria's aspiration to achieve its home-grown technological development and economic transformation. Galadima (2011) also posits

that, to allow 9.5 million *Almajiri* roaming about on our streets will not only deny the children their fundamental human rights as enshrined in the 1999 constitution but will pose a tremendous challenge to the educational, scientific, socio-political development, and the corporate existence of Nigeria as a nation. Supporting this fact, Osawe (2012) pointed out that:

There is a danger and challenge of leaving over 9.5 million of future generations of innocent Nigerian children to multiplicity of Qur'anic teachers from different schools of Islamic thought, theological learning, preferences and agendas thereby, opening the space for possible radicalization of children to the extent that more forms of extremism emerge which could threaten the security of the country (p. 25).

From as few as 100 pupils in 19th century, the *Almajiri* system now accounts for about 9.5 million out of Nigeria's estimated 10 million out of school children (Abdulqadir, 2005). The deprivation of quality education and the disconnection of the children from the parental and societal care apparently mars the good intentions that will ordinarily make the *Almajiri* pupils to enjoy the better of two worlds. While their Islamic education will provide the moral virtues, they will also enjoy the benefits of modern education, which will provide them with skills needed to compete in today's world.

The *Almajiri* model school initiative by the government would have been applauded given the intention to grant access to education for the projected 9.5 million out-of-school children in northern Nigeria as part of efforts to attain the Education For All (EFA) target. Given the manner in which the project has been conceptualized and is being implemented, there are challenges that tend to manifest quite early in the implementation of the project. These challenges include the following.

Illiterate Teachers. One major challenge of the *Almajiri* system of education is the fact that the majority of the teachers are illiterate who may not have attended any formal education to develop their teaching skills. Corroborating this fact, Usman (2010) asserts that the Mallams lack conceptual knowledge and do not have professional qualification to meet up with the new changes in the educational system.

The teachers themselves have not acquired any knowledge about basic science, arts, humanities as well as civic education. The issue of handing over a large number of future generations of Nigerian children to a multiplicity of Qur'anic teachers from different schools of Islamic thought, theological learning, preferences and agendas will undermine the achievement of educational objectives. This scenario poses a great challenge to Nigeria's quest to advance scientifically and technologically. This suggests that a great number of Nigerian children have been deliberately denied the right to become scientists, technologist, among others. This causes great setback to Nigeria's economic and technological development.

No Approved Curriculum for Studies. The secrecy associated with the planning of the curriculum and deliberately keeping it away from the public domain for scrutiny gives

the impression that an agreed suitable curriculum has not been developed for the program in spite of the claims by relevant authorities that it has an acceptable curriculum. The absence of an agreed suitable curriculum would mean that clear coherent mechanism for monitoring and evaluation of the programme would be nonexistent. Even the curriculum arrangement for the *Almajiri* schools is such that it is not organized to the extent that they only depend on the misconceptions given by the half-baked Mallams who use heavy canes and only slate 'wallas' and stick-pen 'Qalams' as the writing materials (Uba, 1987), a process that does not appeal to effective modes of inculcating knowledge and skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that the *Almajiri* system of education achieves its objectives that are consistent with those of the national policy of education, the paper recommends that:

- The *Almajiri* system of education should go through the rigours of the process of planning education and which should be renewed regularly to reflect the prevalent educational needs of the society.
- A curriculum should be fashioned out for *Almajiri* system of education.
- The *Almajiri* teachers should be trained to equip them with the requisite skills in handling teaching and learning and also in modern teaching methodologies and technology.
- Government must invest in the provision of basic infrastructural facilities to provide a conducive teaching and learning environment.
- Value-education subject should be made a compulsory core programme in the *Almajiri* schools.
- Counseling should be instituted into the value re-orientation for the *Almajiri* in the system.
- A trust fund should be created to fund the proposed reform for *Almajiri* education system by northern Nigerian government and supported by the federal government.
- The recommended integrated *Almajiri*/western education curriculum should focus on value-based education with emphasis on respect for and appreciation of human dignity using thematic and practical activities for effective learning delivery.

CONCLUSION

The paper examined the circumstances of the *Almajiri* system of education in Nigeria, tracing the historical development and highlighting the current practices. It was observed that depriving the large and growing number of *Almajiri* children of quality basic and functional education will undermine the developmental efforts of government and the attainment of EPA, MDGs among other notable international conventions and protocols. The paper further highlighted the cost implications of the deprivation on the individuals and the nation. The challenges militating against the effective conduct of the *Almajiri* system of education were identified. It was recommended among other things that the *Almajiri* system of education will need to be subjected to the rigours of educational planning and mainstreamed into the formal system of education in Nigeria.

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