

Child Begging: Poverty and Misgovernance as a Causal Factor in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Child-begging is a phenomenon that sends the school going age children on the street and begs for alms, as they attend a local Islamic (*almjirii*) school in most part of northern Nigeria. The menace of child-begging in has assumed an alarming rate. The institution of the state does not do much to curtail this menace. This study adopted a thematic approach, and data was collected at secondary sources. The findings of the study reveals that High rate of illiteracy, coupled with low family incomes stemming from unemployment and lack of good governance in Nigeria explains the reasons for this menace. The recently conceived new Model Islamic school system by the state where both Islamic and Western Education is taught and pupils kept in the school hostel is yet to take effect. Could this address the menace in northern Nigeria? This paper examines the two possible causative factors critically and recommends that the government should address the issue of poverty and unemployment while ensuring consistency in implementing the new policy as conceived, planned.

Keywords: Child-Begging, Poverty, Misgovernance, Northern Nigeria, *Almajiri*. *Almajirai*.

Introduction

In most cities of Northern Nigeria, there exists this phenomenon of small school-going age children, dirty and tattered in outlook, seen roaming the street, with pans begging for food as well as for money from people they come across. That phenomenon is what we referred to as Child Begging.

Conceptually, from legal view point a Child is seen as a minor. Biologically a child is defined as a human between the stages of birth and puberty. Politically, the definition most a times go in line with states youth policy. Most countries of the world define a child to mean every human being below the age of 18 years. When children of this age bracket get indulged into the act of begging or *almajiranchi*, are termed as Child Beggars, or *Almajirai* in Hausa language.

Child begging and its attendant consequences seem to be on the increase in northern Nigeria, particularly in the North-West and the North-East sub regions. The menace of this juvenile begging being restricted to the North is informed by the region's high level of poverty, culture of dependence within the locals and lack of good governance from the state bureaucracy as it become eminent over the years, to confront the problem head on. The menace also seems to continue unabated largely because of the due recognition accorded to local *Malams* (Local Teachers) who are the direct beneficiaries of the child exploitation. These they largely do by hinging on the ignorance of the parents and combining the unwanted values under the pretext of religion without recourse to the genuine teachings of Islam. These local and traditionally conservative *Malams* and their collaborative dependant northerners have succeeded in making the poor villagers and town dwellers believe that such culture was part of learning the teachings of Islam and therefore attracts rewards from God.

Although not all the beggars in Northern Nigeria are from the *Almajiri* schools, those in the *Almajiri* school system constitute a significant number. An estimated eight million Nigerian Children live in *Almajiri* schools, an Islamic School system common in Northern Nigeria..." BBC News (2013).

An attempt is therefore made by this paper, to highlight the causative factors and proffer possible solutions to curb the menace of child neglect and its attendant consequences for sustainable human development in the Northern part and indeed the country as a whole.

Theoretical framework

Theories are most crucial in studies like this, because their absence will not give the work a good shape to advance the arguments we want to build on. Therefore, this study will adopt the **modernization theory** in other to put in context the argument within the framework of the modernization thinkers.

Modernization arguments came in phases, from 50's and 60's through the 1970's. The phase for the diffusion of western style of living, education technical knowledge acquisition and creativity, (Lerner, 1958), Schramm, 1964). Also, the phase of propagating the influence of western civilization through cultural and economic imperialism (Schiller, 1976)

Modernization theory generally are postulations made by a group of political and explains to some

extent why other societies cannot developed and prescribed ways and processes through which societies and develop. Although there are many perspectives to the postulations and application of the modernisation theory, the basic underlining assumption of the theory are, that;

- Society got to develop after following through a series of certain processes.
- These stages and process are dependent on the degree and patterns of social differentiation and the reintegration of structural and cultural components that are functionally compatible for the societal maintenance.
- Contemporary developing societies are at the pre-modern stage of evolution.
- They will eventually achieve economic growth and will take on the social, political and economic features of the Western and North American societies which have progressed to the highest stage of social evolutionary development
- This modernization will result as complex western technology is imported and traditional structural and cultural features incompatible with such development are overcome.

The Tenets of the theory

The modernization theorist, have different perspectives and arguments to their postulations. W. W. Rostow, for example, presented the Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto (1960) with focus on the economic system side of modernization, explaining the factors needed for a country to follow and get modernized, through the take-off model.

This paper adopts modernization theory because of its relevance to context of the arguments the paper seeks to present. Modernization theory, seen as an attempt to explain certain process which the developing countries should follow so as to get develops. A lot of theorists within the circle aptly proffer various prescriptions on the processes and paradigms to achieve both growth and development. Looking at the proposition of Eisenstadt, for instance, it is about total change process of the entire system; both political and economic systems of the society. In his words, that;

“Historically, modernization is the process of change towards those types of social, economic, and political systems that have developed in Western Europe and North America from the seventeenth century to nineteenth centuries to the South America, Asia, and Africa continents (Eisenstadt, 1966, p.1)

Also, the theorists’, opined that, the internal factors such as illiteracy, traditional agrarian structure, too many attachments to superstitious beliefs, lack of communication and infrastructure, lack of division of labour and absence of specialization, etc are fundamental explanations as to why the underdeveloped societies remain as such.

These explanations can well be conceived in the light of the issue of the *almajiri* and child-begging within the area of study. The bases of begging as practice today are poverty and unemployment. This in simple terms is because the economy of most of these places we have rampant cases of child begging as closed and poor, stemming from low investment, low productivity and lack of skills and modern tools and poor implements for cultivation and production. This brings about low employment in the society, low income and no investment. Children are being forced by circumstances to take responsibilities that are not theirs at that age.

The conservative nature of the Almajiri school system and the institutional failure to adjust the system to modern ways of learning, led to stagnation in the system and hence, failure to modernize led to conservative problems as advocated by the theorist. The theory explains the framework of why these rampant cases of child begging. Economic indicators and poverty profile of our case studies are terribly bad.

Similarly, in a paper titled **National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) A Critique**, (Babayo, S. & Abubakar, M. S., 2013) presented the percentages of poverty statistics by region as captured in the 2012 Human Poverty in Nigeria. The same “poverty captured” regions of the North East and the North West were having the highest recorded percentages of reported poverty cases

Table 1: POVERTY INDEX BY GEO-POLITICAL ZONE IN NIGERIA

| | |
|-----------------|-------|
| North – East | 55.9% |
| North – West | 55.0% |
| North – Central | 49.8% |
| South – West | 48.4% |
| South – South | 39.8% |
| South – East | 38.8% |

Source: (Babayo & Abubakar, 2013, 10)

This therefore explains the correlations between poverty and begging in most of these parts of the country. The figures for North-East and North-West, are alarming.

Table 2: NATIONAL POVERTY LEVEL: 1980 – 2012

| Year | Poverty level % |
|------|-----------------|
| 1980 | 27.2 |
| 1985 | 46.3 |
| 1992 | 42.7 |
| 1996 | 65.6 |
| 2004 | 54.4 |
| 2007 | 70.6 |
| 2010 | 70 |
| 2012 | 70 |

Source: (Babayo & Abubakar, 2013, 10)

Table 2 above, are figures from the National Bureau for Statistics, which shows the percentages of national poverty level in 2012. The total poverty headcount rose from 27.2% in 1980 to 65.6 in 1996, an annual average of 8.88% over 16-year period. However, between 1996 and 2004, the headcount declined by an annual average of 2.1% to 54.4% over the same period, the percentage of the core poor rose from 6.2% to 29.3% and declined to 22% in 2004. The percentage rose dramatically of those in poverty line in Nigeria to 70% in 2010 and in 2012 respectively (Babayo & Abubakar, 2013, 10)

CHILD BEGGING

Delhi Commission for protection of Child Right, argues that, “Child begging has sometimes been presented as a survival strategy, since children engaged in begging come from impoverished families who do not have an alternative income-generating activity”.

Sociologically, begging is a social deviance and a social problem which includes gaining material benefit by asking for money from other persons, with no intent to reimburse the money or to provide service in return (Claire Healy and Madalina Rogoz, 2012).

Most child beggars from northern Nigeria came from the *makarantan allo*, or the Islamic Qur’anic Schools. It is an informal school system, known as the *almajiri* system of informal education. The *almajiri* system is an old practice in Nigeria. It started before the contact of the Nigerian state with the western world or colonialism and exists not only in Nigeria, but also in other countries. The...*Almajiri* system is age long and practiced in several countries, which include Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iraq...”(Odoh,2012) the practice of the system might vary according to country, of course, given the divergent socio-cultural and political and economic differences and viabilities

In Nigeria, the *almajiri*...” system started in the 11th century as a result of the involvement of Borno rulers in Qur’anic literacy. Over seven hundred years later, the Sokoto caliphate was founded principally through Islamic revolution base on the teachings of the holy Qur’an. These two empires runs similar Qur’anic learning system which over time came to be known as the *Almajiri* system (Abdulqadir, 2003)

The system is quite age long, but the process of its development, application and transformation is what has translated to constituting problems of the system as it is today, perhaps, because of the nature and character of youths referred to “urchins” or hoodlums,” (Udoh, 2012) this was because of the operational process of how the system is being carried out today.

Before now, and precisely during the colonial era, “the school pupils lived with their parents for moral upbringing. All the schools were located within the immediate environment from where the pupils came. The Dan-fodio revolution brought with it some modifications; like the establishment of an inspectorate of Qur’anic literacy and the inspectorate reports directly to the Emir concerning all matters relating to the school; the schools were maintained by the state, communities, parents, *Zakkah*, *Waqf* and supplement by the teachers and the students through farming. "Bara" as it is known today, was completely unheard of. Teachers and their pupils, in return provided the community with Islamic Education, reading and writing the Qur'an, in addition, to the development of *Ajami* i.e. writing and reading of Hausa language using Arabic Alphabets. Based on this system, which is founded upon the teachings of Qur’an and Hadith, the then Northern Nigeria was largely educated with a complete way of life, governance, customs, traditional craft, trade and even the mode of dressing (Abdulqadir, 2003:1)

Today, the *almajiri* system in Nigeria has produced this child beggars in multitude. “The National Council for the Welfare of Destitute (NCWD) puts the current population of the *Almajirai* at about 7 million.” One can imagine 7 million potential judges, accountants, engineers etc being wasted away. (Abdulqadir, 2003). That means the future of those that lives under the *Almajiri* school system. UNICEF puts the number to an estimated figure of 8.6 million “orphaned children” in Nigeria.

The Current practice of begging

Begging, as an indication of abject poverty (Adedibu, 1989) is always the major way out for the helpless poor. It is a practice of open solicitation for assistance (Adewuyi, 2007) To beg according to Oxford Dictionary (sixth edition, 2001) simply means to ask for money, food, clothes etc, as a gift or charity. Begging, is” ...a practice of open solicitation for assistance with money, food and /or clothing, from anonymous wayfarers, through pleas, flagrant deceit, or exposure of deformities, is a critical component of Nigeria’s urban interactions, or more appropriately, distractions (Adewuyi, 2007). The nature, type and process of the act of begging may vary from place to place. However, the act is related and almost means the same.

Fabregas (1971) in a study conducted in Chiapas (Mexico), reported that, the ugly experience in Chiapas is similar to that in Africa. In addition to the fact that lack of political will and religious institutions encourage begging. In his intensive research study in Chiapas, Mexico, Fabregas (1971) identifies six categories of beggars, which are similar to those in Nigerian cities. They include: (i) the physically deformed and disabled and otherwise incapacitated; (ii) the physically deformed and handicapped but with relatively less disability such as those with single amputations or partial blindness; (iii) those who claimed to be medically ill or appear to be so (iv) those who claim illness but do not look so; (v) those with prominent symptoms of psychiatric disability; and (vi) the elderly. Ayagi, (1997) identifies six broad categories of beggars. These include: (i) the disguised beggars; (ii) the apparently maimed beggars; (iii) cultural beggars, including multiple-child bearing mothers and praise singers; (iv) the lepers, the blind and the crippled; (v) the young and the elderly; and (vi) the *Almajirai* (young quranic (sic) school boys).

Jibril (1997) attempts a different classification by identifying such beggar-types as: (i) victims of child abuse; (ii) the unemployed with sophisticated and refined form of begging (iii) the underemployed; (iv) the disabled and handicapped; and (v) old people.

Begging, in the north has become a cultural practice that is seen by many as a symbolic practice brought by the Islamic religion. While the *almajiri* education is mostly and commonly associated with the pupils from the traditional Islamic schools, known as *tsangaya*, or *Makarantar Allo*, this practice has nothing to do with Islamic religion, for begging itself, have no room in the religion.

Today, the system tends to give Islamic education through a process one can term as a trauma. “...an under-aged kid is normally sent far away from home in order to acquire Islamic knowledge. Hence, such children, some just a little above four years, end up in the hands of a *Malam*, who has been deemed worthy to be understudied...the *Malam*, having seen his task as a service that will receive blessings from God, will receive the children and be made to cater for their basic needs even if he cannot provide for his immediate family. He...gives them little or nothing in terms of feeding, puts the children in unhygienic accommodations or wherever he can afford and provides little or nothing...of clothing. These children are left at the mercy of the society, literally left to scavenge for food remnants from neighbors and this is how they are to spend a greater part of their formative years, like forgotten refugees in their own country. Struggling, hustling and suffering, the noble trait of perseverance comes to *Almajirai* through days in the streets and nights in the chill, with stomachs filled with food from unsuspecting guests at restaurants or at worse left-over of day before which they manage to elicit from charitable neighbors (Hassan Ibrahim and Moses Alao, 2010:1)

The way the *almajiri* system is practiced today, seems it has already lost its focus and thereby bringing an entirely negative innovation into the system. The UNICEF, for example opined that, *Almajiri* system is one other ways through which teaching, especially that of religious education is taking place informally, “...however, the system has been diverted from its original objective and the children have become a means to financial gain by their substitute caregivers who send them to beg in the streets and to carry out other menial jobs...” (UNICEF).

“The system lacks good teachers and a fairly healthy environment. The standards are very low because of the emergence of half-baked semi-illiterate Qur’anic *Mallams* who use the system as a means of attaining livelihood rather than a way of life itself. The pupils struggle to cater for themselves and to support the *Mallams*; which takes most of the time rather than engage in learning. The society and the parents have abdicated their obligations of properly caring for and educating their children. These bowl-carrying children have now become so ubiquitous in almost all nooks and corners of the Northern states such that we would almost be made to believe that, that is where, Almighty Allah (SWT) wants them to be” (Ibrahim, 2012)

The rising number of child urchins (*Almajirai*) in most of the Northern states has a direct link to poverty, especially in rural areas inhabited by the Hausa/Fulani...” beggars found in cities...juvenile beggars (who beg in the name of Koranic education) are northern phenomenon as poverty and related socio-economic maladies are the bane of most beggars in the...country” (Adedibu and Jelili (2006).

Begging as product of poverty

In Nigeria, poverty is a social problem as considerable number of the population is affected by this scourge. For

instance, an estimate by World Bank (2000) indicates that over 45% of the country's population live below the poverty level while about two third (2/3) of this group are extremely poor.

Although, the studies conducted by Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) between 1980 and 1996 reveals that poverty was more pronounced among rural than urban dwellers. Recent trends in the country, however, suggest that urban poverty is increasingly becoming a problem. The incidence of urban poverty in Nigerian society can be viewed as the root of many social ills in the urban centres. Such social menace includes begging and other related anti-social behaviour. The psychological effect of poverty on individual strips him of his self-respect and human dignity. One important manifestation of this, especially in Nigeria, is the involvement of considerable number of its population in begging.

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Another perspective to the issue of this development is education. In many Muslim dominated societies particularly in northern part of Nigeria, the Islamic schools are held side by side the western schools, that is opportunities are being given to these young school going children to attend and acquire knowledge from both perspective of the western and Islamic schools, that perhaps explains one of the reasons why the rampant cases of the *Almajiri* system school system in place. The North-East and the North West in particular are those with the more rampant issues of the child begging and the *Almajiri* phenomena.

In a study conducted by the federal ministry of Education in the year 2010, for example, “the rate of Children who have never been to school is also alarming in the North (Akowe, 2011) the study reveals that 72% of Children in Borno state have never been to school. Children of school going age in most of the northern states which are core-Muslims, patronize the *Almajiri* Schools (Ogo, 2012)

| Education Survey | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Highest number in school | Lowest number in School |
| Ondo – 119 out of every 120 | Zamfara – 28 out of every 120 |
| Anambra – 119 out of every 120 | Borno – 29 out of every 120 |
| Cross River – 114 out of every 120 | Kebbi – 34 out of every 120 |
| Delta, Abia – 113 out of every 120 | Sokoto, Yobe 42 out of every 120 |
| Plateau – 113 out of every 120 | |

Source: Ogo, (2012; p.231)

The table above shows a survey conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education in 2012. The number of school enrollment in some selected state of the federation. The picture vividly depicts the backwardness of particularly the states in the northeastern and northwestern regions. These are states with higher reported cases of child beggars roaming the streets.

Misgovernance

This is an intermediate term used in international development literature to describe how public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific, UNESCAP (2009); Khan, (2004) posits that, Governance is “the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented or not implemented. Government is as an institution, is the key principal actor for governance. Other actors involved in governance vary depending on the level of the institutions within the government. At the national level for example, the media, the lobbyists, international donors, multi-national cooperation, etc may play a role in influencing decision-making process. (Unescap, 2009).

The reluctance or sheer negligence from the part of the government to act on this menace, which is as old as the history of these respective societies, shows the unwillingness of the respective authorities to do something positive with the aim of addressing this societal problem. According to Delap (2009) that “this extreme form of abuse and exploitation and the current lack of action by governments to tackle it sensitively and effectively are particularly troubling” (Begging for Change, 2009). If the state institution is concerned, it could not have allowed it to degenerate to this level.

What Policy Role has the state played?

As glaring as these facts are, questions like what is the government doing? What role and effort is the government making in trying to address this problem?

Adedibu (1989) provide answers to such a question when he affirms;

“that government has not made any meaningful provision to address the problem of begging in Nigeria. He observes that instead of government to rehabilitate beggars by offering them shelter and productive employment, they are cleared off the streets during

international meetings which brings nationals from developed countries to Nigeria. The beggars' resurfaces when such meeting ends". (Adedibu, 1989: n.p).

This also means that the previous governments were unable to provide for the socio-economic, health and mental rehabilitations of it beggars. That was exactly the practice and a posture that depicts the un-seriousness of the government when it comes to any meaningful policy or programmes to bring about the end of this menace before now.

There was a paradigm shift in approach and a complete departure from the previous governmental position with regards the state's position on this given issue. The enthronement of the democracy and the manifestation of the rule by civilians in Nigeria, particularly right from the second republic, there wasn't any regime that ever came up with a concise policy, a well define programme with that seems capable of addressing this problem. No any policy action in the country apart from the present Jonathan Administration.

It is this Administration that has ever committed such a huge amount of budget in an attempt to address this menace of child-begging and the *almajiri* issue. Those governments have focused attention on the *almajiri* and also have put down a tangible proposal that is already in action. From all indication, this is the first step to address the plight of the *almajirai* and restore hope in their future. The *Almajiri* Model Schools as initiated and is being implemented by the present Administration will definitely go a long way in addressing this menace.

"Our administration believes that the time has come for the nation to build on the moral foundation of the traditional system by providing the *almajirai* with conventional knowledge and skills that will enable them to fully realize their creative and productive potentials" (Alchenu, 2012: 59)

The above statement is an acknowledgement by Mr. President, of the need of the reform of the more than a century old system so that it can enable the moral training and modern skill acquisition of the *almajirai* and that they in turn can contribute meaningfully to society. The vice president, Namadi Sambo, speaking at the review meeting of the *almajiri* education programme, said that, "the *almajiri* education programme would be spread across the 36 states of the federation in order to accommodate indigent children who cannot afford basic formal education in Nigeria" (Elechi and Yekorogha, 2013).

This from all indication is aimed at addressing their plight with all sense of purpose. The government resolve to commit large resources of billions of Naira really depicts her intention to once and for all do something meaningful and tangible.

"reforming the clan of visibly malnourished, barely clothed and mindlessly abandoned children who, for early in life, are exposed to the harsh realities of their environment, roaming the streets bowls on their heads and begging for alms" (Muo, I. K., 2012)

If the government estimates for the indigent students that are roaming the street and begging for alms of nine and a half million is anything to go by, the government need to be very systematic and really committed to the ideals she has put in place to see that this policy of the model education has succeeded.

Conclusions

Section 11 of the 2003 draft child right act, states that every child is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person, and accordingly, no child shall be ... [11 (d)] held in slavery or servitude, while in the care of a parent, legal guardian or school authority or any other person or authority having the care of the child.

Poverty, unemployment, and the lack or the delay in the proactive posture of the government, may not only be the salient reason, but definitely, they are among the fundamental explanation of why it existed in the first place, and also lead the situation resulting to the present undesirable stage.

Volatile and persistent violence in northern Nigeria has been traced to some of these street beggars. We all know that some of the reasons people or families turn to begging is displacement caused by communal clashes, death of parents, inadequate family income, unemployment, lack of access to education, abandonment by parents, lack of accommodation, drug abuse and peer influence.

Much as poverty is the major cause of street begging in Nigeria, there is need for government at all level to eradicate poverty to the barest level to reduce the number of beggars on the street. Government should provide jobs for people in the society so that they in turn can take care of their families.

Recommendations

From the findings of this paper, we recommend the following, as a measure to address the menace and also improve the status of the *almajiri* school system:

- (a) Governments at all levels; Local, State and Federal should be proactive on the issue of child-begging in particularly northern Nigeria every organ of state machinery has a lot to contribute policy wise, towards addressing this menace. While the legislature should channel their energies to legislate on and bring about bills/acts that will prohibit child begging. Also, ensure the executive arm of government involves merit and government to shoulder their responsibilities of the *almajiris* by providing a sound education

- in a conventional way like former President Goodluck Jonathan started; and also bringing the child labour law and the child right act into effect.
- (b) Most states, in Northern Nigeria, where this menace is on the increase, did not pass the child right act, as put forward by the national assembly in to law. If states in the northern part of Nigeria should be made to adopt the child right act in their respective states assemblies, the menace of both the child begging and destitution would have been addressed.
 - (c) The executive organ should have and demonstrate such will by approving such a bill/acts and making them part and parcel of our laws and the Judiciary should bend on seeing these laws, when come to being are well implemented as spelt by the law makers. They should however, see to it that, violators of such provisions are brought to book. The passing into law of recent in Kano state in this direction is a step towards addressing the menace.
 - (d) Knowledge acquisition far away from home is not an established social or religious law and therefore need to be reformed. A child should not be forced to leave his family at early age without care, to face starvation and neglect. Children do not have to roam the streets begging, before they are fed. The way the *Almajiri* custom is being practiced does not speak well of the Islamic faith or the people of northern part of Nigerian in particular. Hence, parents must have to their responsibilities to fend for their children as required by even their religious teachings.
 - (e) Social campaigns against dehumanizing implication of getting involved in begging as a means of livelihood should be mounted by the community leaders in conjunction with the government at all levels. The government should update and uphold and enforce the national child labor policy as well as the child right act to check all forms of child abuse and neglect, as well as child labor and child destitution.
 - (f) Most of these children roaming the streets are not accountable to anyone. Bad elements in the society may use these children as they grow to either as political hoodlums or gangs and becoming prey to criminal and terrorist activities as well as liability to the society. This is the very reason why the authorities concerned should mop them off the street.
 - (g) The Educational system in the country should incorporate the *almajiri* education, side by side the conventional curriculum. Skills acquisition training workshops and resource should form part of the reviewed education curriculum for the *almajiris*.
 - (h) Philanthropic organisations, lobbyists, multi-national corporations, and other international donor agencies that operates within the country should assist in funding or providing service oriented assistance to the education and welfare of the *almajiri's*, and especially the new integrated *almajiri schools*.

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