

## ***Almajirai* in Northern Nigeria: A collective responsibility**

The enrolment of many boys and young men in traditional Qur'anic schools rather than formal education has become an issue of growing concern in northern Nigeria. The *almajirai* – the students of such schools – have attracted attention because of new attempts to universalise primary education and growing concerns about child welfare. They have also been associated with Islamic radicalisation and militancy. Many people think of *almajirai* as a public nuisance, and of their parents as backward and neglectful. Whatever our reason for being concerned about the *almajirai*, we need a proper understanding of their situation for our interventions to be beneficial. To improve the *almajirai*'s situation, confronting and renegotiating the stereotypes about them is a necessary first step. Rather than reviling the system, viable alternatives need to be made available to poor rural households. Moral indignation about the *almajirai* is no substitute for purposeful social policy. Respect for the *almajirai*, especially in their work roles as domestic help, needs to be strengthened, and opportunities need to be made available to further their education.

### **The *almajirai*: the issues at stake**

The *almajirai* are boys and young men from primary-school age to their early twenties who have come to the cities and villages in Northern Nigeria to study the Qur'an. Unlike the students of local Qur'anic and modern Islamic (*Islamiyya*) schools, the *almajirai* do not stay with their parents, most of whom reside in rural areas. They live with their Qur'anic teacher, who only provides limited supervision and care.

The *almajirai* learn to read, write, and recite the Qur'an. Modern subjects and Islamic subjects apart from the Qur'an are not part of their curriculum. This means *almajirai* hardly learn skills that can sustain them economically in the future. Outside of lessons, *almajirai* earn their daily livelihood. Older students do menial jobs and engage in petty trade or handicrafts. Younger students work as household help or beg for food and money. This exposes them to verbal and physical abuse in households or on the streets, and many *almajirai* complain about being used as scapegoats in the neighbourhoods of their schools.

The most reliable estimate for Kano suggests some 300,000 boys and young men – more than one in eight 6- to 21-year-olds – live as *almajirai* in that state. Although various state governments, as well as the federal government, have launched campaigns to address the situation of the *almajirai* (e.g. by providing livelihood support, or by setting up 'model schools' integrating modern and religious subjects),

the system still operates largely outside the reach of government intervention and support. The situation of the *almajirai* needs to be urgently addressed as the young people involved suffer not only from abuse and stigmatisation, but also fail to acquire economically useful skills to sustain them in their future lives. This nurtures fears about – and fosters possibilities of – them eventually turning to radicalised and violent religious groups.

Substantive and sustained interventions are needed by a wide range of actors: a) to tackle the structural factors underlying the enrolment of young people as *almajirai*, and b) to address the difficulties they face once they are living as *almajirai*.

### **Methodology for understanding *almajirai*: listening to insiders**

This brief is based on more than a year of ethnographic research between 2009 and 2011, which was conducted in both rural and urban areas of Kano State. We collected data in the form of fieldwork observations, semi-structured interviews, group conversations and casual interactions with *almajirai*, their parents and caregivers, their teachers, and former *almajirai*. We also transcribed and translated 'radio interviews' that the *almajirai* conducted independently amongst each other with a tape recorder provided by our research team. We discussed photographs they took with disposable cameras, and produced a participatory docu-drama together about their perspec-

## **Policy Brief N°2**

**February 2013**

Based at the University of Oxford and the development Research and Project Centre in Kano, the **Nigeria Research Network (NRN)** connects European, American, and Nigerian academics and practitioners who have extensive experience with empirical and development-oriented research in northern Nigeria.

The **IRP-Abuja Project** conducts fundamental research into the role of Islam in society, politics and the economy in northern Nigeria. The project is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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**Box 1: Education choices in Northern Nigeria**

	<b>Secular Western education</b>	<b>Islamiyya education</b>	<b>Qur'anic education</b>
<b>Costs</b>	officially free but recurrent expenses for learning materials, uniforms, school running costs & in some cases transportation	expenses for learning materials & uniforms, levy for teacher's salary & school running costs	donation (grain, money) for teacher upon enrolment and graduation
<b>Subjects</b>	secular subjects, some religious subjects (Islamic Religious Studies)	Qur'an & other Islamic subjects, incl. Fiqh, Hadith, Arabic & Tajweed, sometimes secular subjects	Qur'an
<b>Student accommodation</b>	at primary level mostly day schools, at secondary level many boarding schools	mostly day schools	day and 'boarding' schools, 'boarding' schools often lack physical infrastructure; students sleep & study in mosques, open space & teachers', neighbours', or employers' houses
<b>Schedule</b>	mostly morning shifts, some schools operate afternoon shifts	morning, afternoon, and evening shifts	early morning, morning, afternoon, and evening shifts; seasonal movement to rural areas during farming season
<b>Teaching methods</b>	age-graded classes, classrooms, desks, chairs, blackboards	age-graded classes, classrooms, desks, chairs, blackboards	flexible learning groups based on students' progress, wooden slates & ink, prayer mats on the floor, often in mosques or open space

tives on their lives (see link in references). Our effort throughout was, as much as possible, to capture the worldview of the *almajirai*.

### **The *almajiri* system past and present**

Until the arrival of the British in northern Nigeria at the beginning of the 20th century, students and graduates of the *almajiri* system were well respected and politically influential. Over the 20th century, secular Western education became increasingly important to access political power and jobs. Since the economic crises after the oil boom (1970s) and structural adjustment (initiat-

ed in 1986), more affluent Muslims have radically reduced the support that they had previously given to the *almajirai* in terms of alms, food, and accommodation. Many of those still endorsing the system became too impoverished to offer much help. New reform-oriented Islamic movements established modern religious schools (Islamiyya schools) to replace the *almajiri* schools, which are now regarded as 'backward'. Many began to query the *almajirai*'s practice of begging, which in their view Islam permits only in acute emergencies.

Today, many Nigerians think that children become *almajirai* because their parents, 'backward' and 'ignorant' villagers, do not value secular education and see the *almajiri* system as a convenient way of ridding themselves of the 'burden' of bringing up their children. Many people, including government officials and legislators, claim that the *almajirai* grow up without learning anything of economic or social worth, and that most of them end up as criminals, rioters in religious clashes, or even terrorists. To many Nigerians, the *almajirai* are a source of social panic and concern.

The welfare and socio-economic opportunities of *almajirai* limited. And negative stereotypes can also develop a life of their own when people base their actions on them. For example, *almajirai* are treated with little respect because they are considered notorious trouble-makers. The *almajirai*, in turn, experience such treatment as unfair. People advocate banning the *almajiri* system because they perceive it to be the result of parental neglect and ignorance. What is missed by this moralistic stance is a better understanding of the driving forces leading parents to send their kids to *almajiri* schools and of the *almajirai*'s own most pressing concerns.

### **The *almajiri* system: motivations & push factors**

Some parents enrol their children as *almajirai* mainly for ideological reasons. They believe it is their religious duty to make sure their children study the Qur'an and consider a certain degree of hardship necessary for a child to take his studies seriously and to learn respect and endurance. Such parents see some moral worth in the *almajiri* system. But the *almajiri* system is also often a last resort, turned to when other options fail. Poverty is a major factor constraining choice in this way. Poverty contributes to high divorce and maternal mortality rates. Children from disbanded families are more likely to become *almajirai* than children from stable households.

Poverty also limits educational options. Many families cannot afford secular education for all their children. Besides, secular education in Kano has long been neglected, especially in rural areas.

Government schools are notorious for their poor quality, which make them at best an uncertain investment in children's futures. The problem of accessible costs is therefore compounded by that of poor quality educational outcomes. Furthermore, school enrolment often implies that a child cannot help out with the farm work, as school timetables are poorly adjusted to the work rhythms of peasant households. This makes enrolment more difficult for families who depend on the labour contributions of all their members, including the young.

### What is it like to live as an *almajiri*?

Both begging and employment as household helpers predispose *almajirai* to verbal and physical abuse. They are aware that many people, especially in urban areas, consider them hoodlums or 'useless people'. The *almajirai* feel that their employers regard them as mostly free labour rather than as people, thus shunning any longer-term responsibility for their wellbeing. They complain of employers who do not respect the lesson schedule of their Qur'anic school and demand that they work during school hours. Payment is often minimal and support falters when a boy falls ill. Access to health provision is minimal and the burden of disease and mortality rate for the *almajirai* are said to be higher than average.

The *almajirai*'s prospects of achieving social standing and prestige are bleak as they compete with Islamiyya schools' students for religion-based status. Their economic prospects look equally drab. Many *almajirai* become proficient petty traders, but this cannot sustain them in a constrained labour market. Returning to subsistence agriculture does not promise a stable livelihood either, as the rural economy is declining due to desertification, population increase, and lack of investments and infrastructure. Nevertheless, *almajirai* have high aspirations. Through their employment in urban middle-class households, many meet age-mates with very different life prospects, and subsequently begin to hope for similar opportunities to enjoy material prosperity and to acquire education (both secular and modern Islamic). The gulf between ambitions and likely outcomes remains large.

### Policy implications

The situation of the *almajirai* warrants interventions on two dimensions:

- The first dimension concerns the conditions on the sending side, with the aim of establishing viable alternatives to the *almajiri* system available to poor peasant parents.
- The second dimension concerns lessening the difficulties *almajirai* face once they are enrolled in the system. As the problems of the *al-*

*majiri* system warrant socio-economic structural changes, most proposed interventions fall primarily within the responsibility of the Nigerian state and federal governments. But the international community and individual families have responsibilities as well.

### Improve conditions on the sending side:

- **Put poverty back on the agenda in a serious way.** Unless rural poverty is addressed, the *almajiri* system and its pertaining problems – and possible threats – will persist. In descriptions of the *almajiri* system as a wrong-but-wilful cultural choice, the structural inequalities shaping educational opportunities in northern Nigeria are easily sidelined. It is important to insist in discussions about the topic that any solution not addressing these structural drivers will be elusive. In particular, the international community can make an important contribution by: lobbying for a more empirically informed approach to the problem of *almajirai*, away from the current atmosphere of moral panic and stereotyping; arguing for general pro-poor social and economic policymaking among Nigerian authorities in order to create an appropriate context for addressing the *almajirai* problem; and making a case for the views and concerns of the young people living as *almajirai* to be taken seriously by all policymakers, domestic and international.
- **Improve quality of, and access to, secular education, especially in rural areas.** The quality of secular education needs to be a key target of policy, focusing on class sizes, sanitary facilities, teaching aids, and the quality of teaching. Teachers need to be better trained and paid. There are already international cooperation programmes targeting teacher-quality and infrastructure provision. More of these need to be rolled out for maximum impact. Secondly, the real cost of secular education must be bearable by rural households. This is largely the responsibility of local and state governments. Thirdly, school timetables need to be adjusted better to the work rhythm of peasant households. This is also the responsibility of local and state governments. Finally, attention needs to be paid to transition rates within the educational system. Students must have the opportunity to graduate from primary to secondary school and from secondary school to higher education. To achieve these improvements, massive investments of human and financial resources need to go into education provision and concerted efforts made to combat corruption. The gov-



## References & resources:

Duniya Juyi Juyi. (How Life Goes.) Docu-drama by and about *almajirai*. Directed by Abdullahi Y Sa'ad and Buhari Murtala. Kano, Nigeria: Goethe-Institut Kano, 2011. (<http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/research/video/video-hlg>)

A saurare mu! (Listen to us!) Radio by *almajirai* children in northern Nigeria. Kaduna, Nigeria: Radio Nigeria Kaduna, UNICEF, NAPTIP, and CAESI, 2010. ([http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/media\\_5617.html](http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/media_5617.html))

Hoechner, Hannah. "Striving for Knowledge and Dignity: How Qur'anic Students in Kano, Nigeria, Learn to Live with Rejection and Educational Disadvantage." *European Journal of Development Research* Vol. 23, No. 5 (2011): 712–728.

ESSPIN, especially work in Kano, Kaduna, and Jigawa States on Islamic, Qur'anic, and Tsangaya Education: [www.esspin.org](http://www.esspin.org)

CAESI: non-profit non-governmental organisation, No. 3 Surveyor Street NNDC Quarters, Kano Metropolitan, Tel: +2348023725446

For contact details and publications of researchers involved in the Nigeria Research Network (NRN), see: [www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/nrn/](http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/nrn/)

ernment of the Northern Region carried out similar investments in education in the 1950s and 1960s, and there is no reason why this cannot be repeated if the political will is there. The international community can contribute: by carrying out projects in rural northern schools, targeting classroom provision, sanitary facilities, teaching aids, and the quality of teaching; and by contributing to targeted social provisioning projects for *almajirai*, especially in the special schools built for them, in order to lessen their current burdens.

- **Sensitise parents.** Most parents do not lack consideration for their children's safety. More awareness of the difficulties *almajirai* are facing may alter parents' decisions. If sensitisation messages come from insiders, including current and former *almajirai*, they are more powerful than moral judgements passed on the system by outsiders. Radio programmes can best reach rural constituencies. Primary responsibility in this task lies with traditional and religious leaders and other community notables.

### Improve *almajirai's* lives and futures:

- **Conceive of *almajirai* as persons worthy of respect and support.** Local and international policy-makers in development can contribute to a more empirically informed and respectful way of thinking about the traditional Qur'anic schooling system by attaching importance to *almajirai's* views on their circumstances and making same public. The international community could support participatory projects such as the docu-drama *Duniya Juyi Juyi* (How Life Goes) (link below). The radio is a medium through which a wide constituency can be reached and has been used with *almajirai* before (link below). Religious leaders and former *almajirai* that 'succeeded' in life may act as advocates and role models. Role models can be found for example at higher institutions of Islamic learning, e.g. the Aminu Kano College of Islamic Legal Studies in Kano. The various organs of state governments can take the lead in organising some of this media work.
- **Offer educational opportunities for current and former *almajirai*.** Offering secular education and vocational training to *almajirai* on their lesson-free days (Thursday and Friday) is unlikely to be perceived as an interference

with their Qur'anic studies by teachers and parents (see ESSPIN projects, details below). Members of the National Youth Service Corps ("corpors") could be employed as teachers, contributing to inter-religious, inter-ethnic and inter-class exchange. Former *almajirai* may be reached through adult education programmes, especially if these are free of costs and available in rural areas. *Almajirai* should also be offered opportunities for a 'lateral entry' into the formal education system, e.g. through access to higher institutions of Islamic learning. The international community can contribute to this effort by investing in skills training projects which could be launched on the back of some of the state and federal government interventions.

- **Strengthen *almajirai's* rights as domestic workers.** Domestic work in the city is a major survival strategy of the *almajirai*. Their employers are crucial to the *almajirai's* wellbeing and are well placed to make a difference to their lives. A public code of conduct, developed with both *almajirai* and their employers, and publicised through the media, establishing good practice in terms of care and payment of household help, could sensitise the population for the *almajirai's* concerns. An ombudswoman should be elected in each neighbourhood to champion the *almajirai's* concerns and to defend their interests. Some northern reformers have advocated dealing with the *almajirai* problem through each urban middle-class family adopting an *almajirai* and caring for his educational and social needs. But before this lofty aim can be achieved, something should be done about the employment terms of those *almajirai* currently in the employ of urban families. The primary responsibility here should lie with NGOs working on this issue, but the international community could contribute to these initiatives by providing support for pilot projects with state and NGO participation, by supporting media work which highlights the views of the *almajirai* and their needs, by lobbying the state and federal governments, and by providing a platform for wider discussion with media representatives (e.g. Freedom Radio, Daily Trust newspaper), traditional rulers, and *almajirai*, e.g. via NGOs supporting them.