The Menace of Almajiri: A Ticking Time Bomb in Northern Nigeria-Unpacking the Causes, Consequences, and Solutions

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Abstract	Original Research Article

The Almajiri system, a traditional Islamic education system, has degenerated into a social menace in Northern Nigeria, perpetuating poverty, illiteracy and insecurity. This study identifies the root causes of the Almajiri problem including poverty, lack of access to western education, cultural practices, neglect from parents, corruption, and weak government policies. Focus group discussion was conducted with 500 participants were used and they were selected through purposive sampling method. Focus group discussion guide were the instrument used for data collection and were subjected to content analysis. Tables and Bar charts were equally used to present some of the data collected for the study. Also, data was collected through academic journals, magazines and books. The consequences of the Almajiri problem are far-reaching, including terrorist recruitment, crime and violence, social unrest, health risk and human rights violations. This study proposes solutions for Northern governors to tackle this issue, including establishing modern Islamic schools, enforcing compulsory education, providing economic support, and lunching awareness campaigns. Additionally, the study revealed that neglect from parents, lack of strong policy frame works, poverty is also linked to lack of access to education, child exploitation and health risk significantly hinders the Almajiri system in northern Nigeria. Therefore, it was recommended to northern governors, imams and Islamic scholars , parents and guardians, community leaders and traditional rulers to strengthen policy frameworks, increase funding, advocate for policy change, support community engagement, develop comprehensive policies, monitor and evaluate programs, encourage Almajiri children to attend school, protect children from exploitation, support policy initiatives and also collaborate with government officials and NGOs in addressing the Almajiri problem. Therefore, it's requires stakeholders to collaborate and coordinate to confront the Almajiri problem holistically to deal with the causes, consequences, and provide sustainable strategy to the issue as timely as possible. By addressing the Almajiri problem. Northern Nigeria can unlock its human capital potential, promote sustainable development, and ensure a brighter future for its children. The comprehensive study provides a roadmap for policy makers, educators, and stakeholders to address the Almajiri problem and create a more secure and prosperous future for Northern Nigeria. With a view to contributing to the ongoing discourse on education, child welfare, and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Almajiri, Northern Nigeria, education, poverty, insecurity, human capital, sustainable development, Islamic education, child welfare, policy.

Introduction

The Almajiri system, which originated from the Arabic word "Almuhajirun" meaning "the Emigrant", was designed to provide Islamic education for children. However, overtime, the system has been hijacked by unscrupulous individuals who exploit these children for personal gains.

Furthermore, despite its significance, the system has been plagued by issues such as child exploitation, poverty, and lack of access to quality education. Involving young children, often from poor families, travelling from rural areas to urban centers in search of Islamic education. The streets of Northern Nigeria are now filled with young Almajiri children, begging for food and living in deplorable conditions. The Almajiri problem has become a ticking time bomb, threatening the very fabric of Nigerian society. The issue has gained national attention, with many stakeholders calling for urgent action to address the problem.

Despite efforts by governments and NGOs, The Almajiri system continue to thrive, perpetuating poverty, illiteracy, disorganized and disorderly, and insecurity in Northern Nigeria. This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the Almajiri Problem, Highlighting the causes, consequences and solutions to this complex issue. The study is guided by the following research question: what are the causes of the Almajiri problem in Northern Nigeria? What are the consequences of the Almajiri problem? What solutions can be implemented to address the Almajiri problem?

Therefore, in Islam, the Almajiri system is a complex issue, and there is different perspective on its permissibility and implementation. The Islamic perspective on the Almajiri system. Encouragement on seeking knowledge, Islam encourage seeking knowledge and education, and the prophet Muhammad (SAW) said, "seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Ibn Majah). The Almajiri system, in its original form, was designed to provide Islamic education to children, which is in line with Islamic teaching.

Islam emphasizes the important of caring for orphans and vulnerable children, and the Qur'an says "they ask you about the orphans; say 'To set their affairs a right is best" (Qur'an 2:220). The Almajiri system, in its original form, was also designed to provide care and support to vulnerable children.

Fundamentally, Islam prohibits the exploitation of children, and the Quran says, "and do not approach the orphans properly except with the best intentions until he reaches maturity" (6:152). The current Almajiri system, which involves children begging on the streets and being exploited is not permissible in Islam. Quran discourage begging, Surah Al- Baqarah (2:273).

Islam places the responsibility of caring for children on their parents and guardians, and the prophet Muhammad (SAW) said, "each of you is shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock" (Bukhari and Muslim)". Parents and guardians have a duty to provide for their children's education, health, and well-being, and should not abandoned them to beg on the streets. Furthermore, Islam emphasizes the important of education, and the Qur'an says, "are those who know equal to those who do not know?" (Qur'an 39:9). The Almajiri system should prioritize education and provide children with access to quality education, rather than just focusing on Islamic studies. Many Islamic scholars and organization have called for reform of the Almajiri system to ensure that it is in line with Islamic teachings and provide a safe and supportive environment for children. While, Islam encourages seeking knowledge and caring for vulnerable children, the current Almajiri system, which involves exploitation and neglect children, is not permissible in Islam. There is a need for reform and improvement of the system to ensure that its provides quality education and care for children, in line with Islamic teaching.

The Almajiri system has been a subject of concern for many years, with millions of children been sent to live with Islamic teachers, known as Mallams, to receive Quranic education. However, this system has been criticized for its poor living conditions, lack of formal education, and

vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. A recent case in Yola, Adamawa state, highlights the dangers of the Almajiri system. A minor, who is an Almajiri was used as a crime scout by a group of thieves who broke into a shop and stole approximately two million naira. The minor was remanded in a juvenile correctional facility, highlighting vulnerability of Almajiri children to exploitation by organize criminal gangs. This case is not an isolated incident, as Almajiri children have become vulnerable to exploitation by extremist groups, such as Boko haram, which has reportedly used Almajiri children to gather intelligent, carried out attacks, and even as suicide bombers. The Almajiri system failure to provide a comprehensive education and economic opportunities has made these children susceptible to recruitment by violent groups. Northern leaders have been accused of abandoning millions of vulnerable Almajiri children on the streets of Northern Nigeria, leaving them to frown for themselves. These leaders, who themselves enjoyed free higher quality education, have failed to provide basic necessities like schooling, healthcare and welfare to these children, making them easy prey for manipulation and exploitation by violent groups. The government must also hold accountable those responsible for exploiting these children and ensure that those perpetrators are brought to justice.

Moreover, there is a need for a shift in the narrative around the Almajiri system. Rather than seeing these children as a burden, they should be viewed as an opportunity for Nigeria to invest in its future. By providing these children with education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, Nigeria can unlock the potential of millions of young people and build a more stable and prosperous future for itself, because when young people raise that society change.

Literature review:

The Almajiri system has been a subject of study by various scholars, including Abdullahi (2018), who examine the historical perspective of the Almajiri system in Nigeria. According to Abdullahi (2018), the Almajiri system was originally designed to promote Islamic education and self-sufficiency among Muslim children. The Almajiri system has been a subject of concern for researchers, policy makers, and civil society organizations. In Nigeria studies have highlighted the system's shortcomings, including poor living conditions, lack of access to quality education, and vulnerability to exploitation (Adamu, 2013; Olaniya and Okemakinde, 2008).

Therefore, the system has been corrupted over time, leading to widespread abuse and exploitation of children (Auwal, 2015). Studies have shown that the Almajiri system is a major contributor to the high rate of illiteracy and poverty in Northern Nigeria (Ibrahim, 2017; nwosu, 2019). The system also perpetuates child labor, as many Almajiri children are force to beg on the streets or work in menial jobs to survive (Ogunniyi and ogunniyi, 2018). Sulaiman (2017) examined the Almajiri system and the problem of street begging in Nigeria, highlighting the need for alternative education options and vocational training programs. Similarly, Yusuf (2015) studied the Almajiri system and the spread of extremism in Nigeria, emphasizing the importance of addressing the root causes of poverty and unemployment.

Abdullahi and Ibrahim (2019) investigated Almajiri system and the challenges of national security in Nigeria, highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach to address the issue. Auwal and Sulaiman (2018) examined the Almajiri system and the problem of child labor in Nigeria, emphasizing the importance of promoting alternative education options and vocational training programs. The system's reliance on begging and street trading has been linked to child labor, trafficking, and radicalization (Adeyemi, 2014; Onuoha, 2015). The system focuses on rote learning and lack of emphasis on critical thinking and skills development has been criticized for limiting the opportunities for Almajiri graduates (Adamu, 2013).

Despite these challenges, some studies argue that the Almajiri system remains an important institution for Islamic education and cultural preservation in Northern Nigeria (Gwarzo, 2003; Muhammed, 2015). These studies suggest that reforming the system rather than abolishing it, is a more viable solution. The Almajiri system in

Northern Nigeria is a significant contributor to the region's high number of out-of-school children. According to 2022-2024 UNESCO institute for statistics and UNICEF update, Nigeria has approximately 20 million out-of-school children, the highest in the world. Roughly one in three children in Nigeria is not in school, with girls comprising nearly 60% of this population. The crisis is driven by insecurity, poverty and regional disparities. With over 50% of these children located in the norther region of Nigeria. Nigeria accounts for 15% of the total out-of-school children globally and 35% regionally in sub-Saharan Africa, the Northern region is most heavily impacted, largely due to Boko-haram insurgency and socio-cultural factors.

The Nigerian government has made efforts to address this issue, including the universal Basic education program. However, more need to be done to integrate modern education into traditional Islamic schools and provide economic support to families. This study builds on existing research by exploring the perspectives of different stakeholders, including Almajiri, parents, imams, policy makers and community leaders/traditional rulers, to identify the root causes of the problem and potential solutions.

Gaps in literature reviewed

In Nigeria there is a plethora of literature on the Almajiri system in Nigeria, but several gaps remain. Lack of empirical studies, most studies on the Almajiri system are qualitative and rely on secondary data. There is a need for empirical studies that collect primary data to provide a more nuance understanding of the system.

There is a lack of recent studies, most of the references cited are from 2015-2019, which may not reflect the current situation of the Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria. Also, there is a lack of longitudinal studies. Most studies on the Almajiri system are cross-sectional, providing a snapshot of the system at a particular point in time. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand the dynamic of the system and its impact on Almajiri children overtime. However, there is a limited discussion on intervention. The literature review highlights the problem associated with the Almajiri system, but there is limited discussion on interventions that have been implemented to address the issues and their effectiveness.

Furthermore, the literature review highlights the need for government intervention, but there is limited discussion on the specific roles and responsibilities of government agencies and policy makers in addressing the Almajiri problem. Also, there is inadequate analysis of government policies, the impact of government policies such as the national policy on education, on the Almajiri system is not well understood.

Ultimately, there is lack of comparative studies with other Qur'anic education system, the Almajiri system is often studied in isolation, without comparison to other Qur'anic education system in west Africa or globally. Consequently, there is insufficient attention to the perspectives of Almajiri children. Almajiri children's own perspectives and experiences are often overlooked in research, despite being key stakeholders in the system. Also, female Almajiri children are also often overlooked in research, despite facing unique challenges and vulnerabilities. Studies are needed to explore their experiences and need. Most studies also focus on rural areas, neglecting the experiences of Almajiri children in urban settings.

However, there is limited understanding of how Boko-haram recruits and manipulates Almajiri children, and what factors make them vulnerable to recruitment. Research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of counter-radicalization programs targeting Almajiri children and identify best practices for preventing extremist recruitment. The Almajiri systems security implication, including its potential to fuel terrorism and violent extremism, require further analysis and attention from policy makers and researchers. Meanwhile, there is a dearth of comparative studies on the Almajiri system in Nigeria and neighboring countries such as Niger republic, Cameroon, and Chad republic which also grapple with similar challenges. A comparative analysis of these countries could provide valuable insights into the similarities and differences in the Almajiri system and its implication for education, child welfare, and national security. Additionally, the

Almajiri system's operation across borders, particularly in the Lake Chad Basin region, is poorly understood. Research is needed to explore how the system is influence by and contributes to regional insecurity challenges. Therefore, the policy frameworks governing the Almajiri system in Nigeria and neighboring countries are often inadequate or poorly implemented. Research is needed to analyze these frameworks and identify areas for improvement, including strategic regional cooperation and coordination mechanisms.

By addressing these gaps, research can inform evidence-based policies and interventions to improve the Almajiri system, promote the welfare of Almajiri children, and mitigate the security risks associated with the system. There is urgent need for research on its vulnerabilities, and its connections to insecurity in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region.

Theoretical framework

Gary Beeker (1964): considered the father of modern human capital theory, Beeker, an American Economist introduced the concept in his book "Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis with special reference to education".

Human capital theory is an economic concept that view human beings as assets or resources that can be developed and invested into increase productivity and economic growth. Human capital theory asserts that investing in education, training, and healthcare can increase human productivity and earning. The theory implies that individuals and societies can accumulate human capital, leading to improve economic out comes.

The theory also forecasts that, investments in human capital will yield returns in the form of increased productivity, earnings, and economic growth. This study is anchored on the human capital theory, which asserts that, education is a key driver of economic growth and development. The Almajiri system by denying children access to quality education, perpetuates poverty and undermines human capital development.

It is relevant to the Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria can be seen as a challenge to human capital development, as it often deprives children of access to quality education and skills training, limiting their future economic prospect. Human capital theory implies that investing in education and training is crucial for economic growth and development. In the context of the Almajiri system, human capital theory implies that, the current system is a significant obstacle to Northern Nigeria's human capital development.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods research designed, combining primary data from surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs) with secondary data from academic journals, textbooks, magazines and bulletins. The study was conducted across five states in Northern Nigeria: Kano, Kaduna, Sokoto, Adamawa, and Gombe.

Primary data collection

A total of 500 participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring representation from:

- Almajiri (n = 125)
- Parents / guardians (n = 100)
- Imams/Islamic scholars (n = 75)
- Policy makers/government officials (n = 75)
- Community leaders / traditional rulers (n = 125)

FGDs were conducted in each state, with 8 – 10 participants per group. The FGD guide explored participants perceptions on the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to the Almajiri system.

Secondary data collection

Secondary data collection was elicited from academic journals, textbooks, magazines, and bulletins to provide context and support primary findings.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data.

Qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and results are presented in tables, and bar charts.
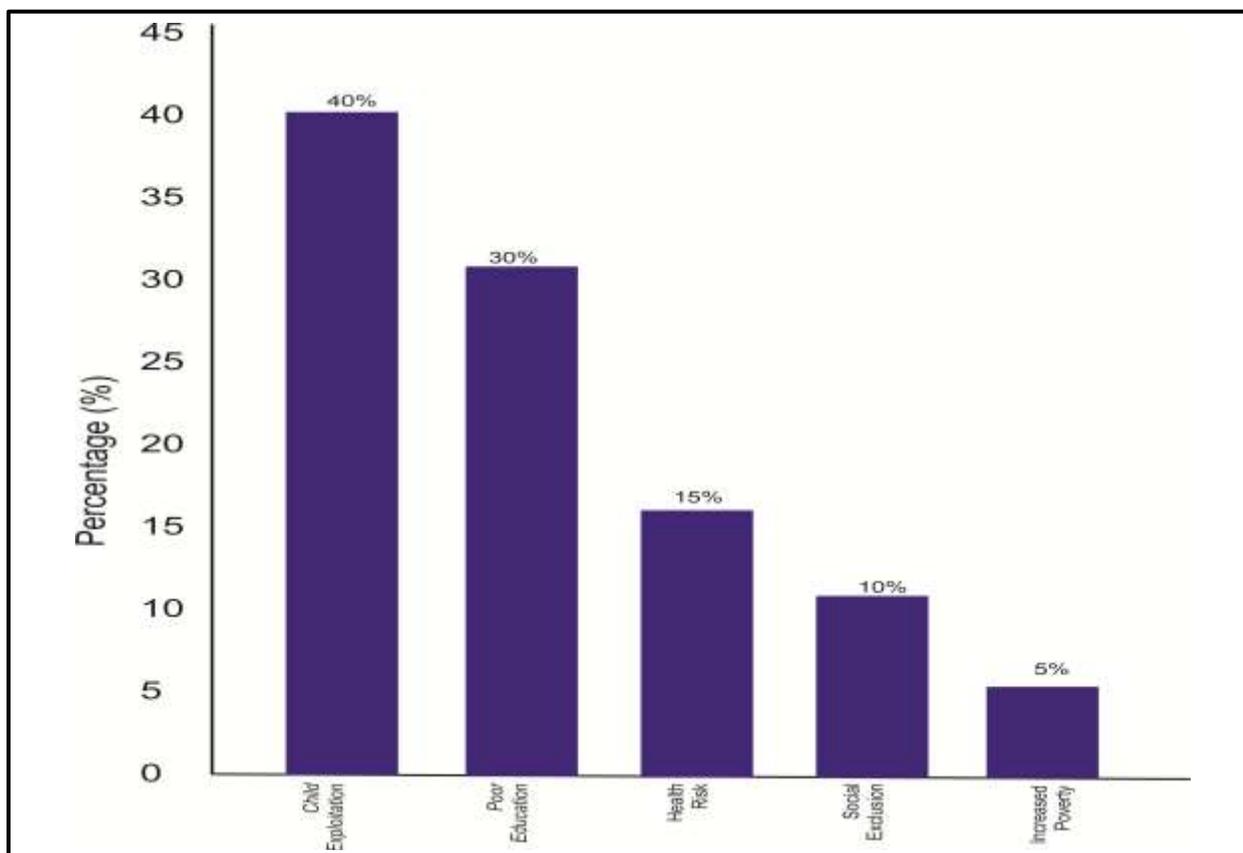
Results and discussions.

Table 1.1: causes of Almajiri system problem

S/no.	Frequency	Percentage
1. Neglect from parents	150	30%
2. Lack of strong policy	125	25%
3. Poverty	100	20%
4. Corruption	75	15%
5. Culture	50	10%

Source: field survey, 2026.

Bar chart

Discussion: The result show that child exploitation (40%) is the most common consequences of Almajiri system, highlighting the urgent need for protection and support for these children. Poor education (30%) and health risks (15%) are also significant concerns, emphasizing the need for improved education and health care services. Additionally, analysis reveals that child exploitation is often linked to lack of access to education and economic opportunities, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support system.

Table 1.3: solution proposed by participants.

S/no.	Frequency	Percentage
1. Strengthen policy framework	175	35%
2. Increase funding for education	125	25%
3. Community engagement and awareness	100	20%
4. Alternative livelihoods for parents	50	10%
5. Improve Almajiri School infrastructure	50	10%

Source: field survey, 2026

Bar chart
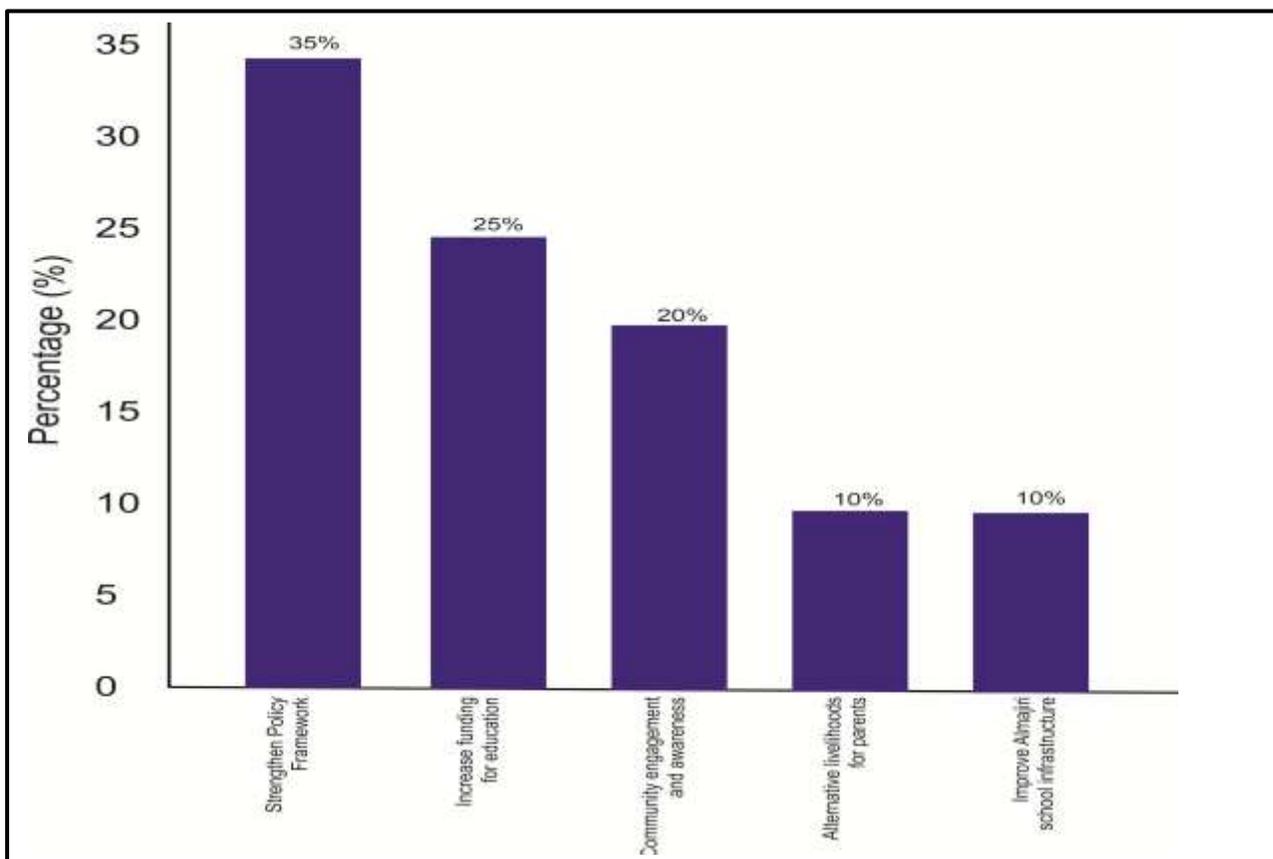
Discussion: The result indicates that strengthening policy frameworks (35%) and increase funding for education (25%) are must proposed solutions to address the Almajiri issue. Community engagement and awareness (20%) are also seen as crucial in addressing cultural and social barriers. In-dept analysis reveals that strengthening policy frameworks is seen as key step in addressing the root causes of the Almajiri system, including poverty and lack of access to education.

Key findings

The scourge of Almajiri in northern Nigeria represents a significant threat to regional stability and national development, the situation demands immediate attention, collaboration and collective action. This study delves into the root causes, far-reaching consequences, and potential solutions to the pressing issue, shedding light on the intricacies of the Almajiri phenomenon.

The following key findings highlight the severity of the situation and inform recommendations for policy makers, northern governors, community leaders and traditional rulers, imams and Islamic scholars, and also parents and guardians, to work in concert.

- Neglect from parents is a major cause (30%) of respondent identified neglect from parents as a primary cause of the Almajiri system.
- Policy gaps exacerbate the issue: lack of strong policy frameworks (25%) and corruption (15%) contribute to the problem.
- Child exploitation is a significance consequence: 40% of respondents reported child exploitation as a common outcome of the Almajiri system

- Poor education is a major concern: 30% of the respondents identified poor education as a significant consequence of the Almajiri system.

- Strengthening policy frameworks is key: 35% of respondents proposed strengthening policy frameworks as a solution to address the Almajiri issue.

The pictures above where I spoke with the Almajiri children in different states of the study. Aged 4 – 10 years, the discussion focus on their living condition, education and overall well-being.

Many of them move bare foot, I bought food and bathroom slippers to them. Some of them who brought from Niger republic by parents who haven't visited in 3-5 years and also, they aren't attending western education schools. They expressed unhappiness for not attending western education school and not learning a trade. The helpless children roam the streets, begging for food to survive. Completely they lack basic amenities.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, aim to address the root causes of the Almajiri system and promote the welfare and education of Almajiri children. The following recommendations are made:

To Northern Governors:

- Strengthen policy frameworks: Develop and implement effective policies to address the Almajiri system, including provisions for education, healthcare, and protection of Almajiri children. Weak policies have contributed to the system's problems; strong policies will ensure accountability and provide a framework for action.
- Increase funding for education: Allocate sufficient funds to improve education infrastructure and services for Almajiri children. Inadequate funding has led to poor education quality: increased funding will bridge the gap and benefit Almajiri children.
- Support community engagements: Collaborate with community leaders, imams and Islamic scholars to promote awareness and engagement on the importance of education and child welfare. Community engagement is vital in changing attitudes and

behavior, ensuring sustainability of interventions.

- Establish monitoring mechanisms: Establish mechanisms to monitor and track the progress of Almajiri children and ensure they are receiving adequate support. Monitoring will help identify areas of improvement and ensure interventions are effective.
- Foster partnership with NGOs: Partner with NGOs and civil society organization to leverage resources and expertise in addressing the Almajiri issue. Partnership can enhance capacity and reach, ensuring more effective interventions.

To Imams / Islamic scholars:

Promote education: Emphasize the importance of education in Islam and encourage parents to prioritize their children's education. Islamic teachings support education, imams can influence parents' decision.

- Advocate for policy change: Use their influence to advocate for policy changes that address the Almajiri system and promote child welfare. Imams can push for policy reforms that benefit Almajiri children.
- Support community engagement: Collaborate with community leaders and government officials to promote awareness and engagement on the importance of education and child welfare. Community engagement will create a supportive environment for Almajiri children.
- Provide guidance and counselling: Provide guidance and counselling to parents and Almajiri children on the importance of education and child welfare. Guidance will help address specific challenges faced by Almajiri children and parents.
- Encourage community-based initiative: Encourage community-based initiatives that support the education and welfare of Almajiri children. Community-led initiatives are often more effective and sustainable.

To policy makers / government officials:

- Develop comprehensive policies: Develop comprehensive policies that address the root causes of the Almajiri system, including poverty and lack of access to education. Comprehensive policies will ensure a holistic approach to addressing the Almajiri issue.
- Increase funding for education and welfare programs: Allocate sufficient funds to support education and welfare programs for Almajiri children. Adequate funding is crucial for effective implementation of programs.
- Monitor and evaluate programs: Regularly monitor and evaluate programs aimed at addressing the Almajiri system to ensure effectiveness. Monitoring and evaluation will help identify areas for improvement.
- Strengthen law enforcement: Strengthen law enforcement mechanisms to protect Almajiri children from exploitation and abuse. Strong law enforcement will deter exploitation and ensure accountability.
- Promote public awareness: Promote public awareness campaigns to raise awareness on the importance of education and child welfare. Public awareness will help change attitude and behaviors.

To parents / guardians:

- Prioritize education: Prioritize their children's education and ensure they have access to quality education. Education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty.
- Support community engagement: Engage with community leaders, imams, and Islamic scholars to promote awareness and engagement on the importance of education and child welfare. Community engagement will provide support and resources.
- Provide basic needs: Ensure their children's basic needs, including food, shelter, and healthcare, are met. Basic needs are essential for children's well-being and education.

- Encourage Almajiri children to attend school: Encourage Almajiri children to attend school and support their education. Encouragement will help Almajiri children stay in school.
- Protect children from exploitation: Protect their children from exploitation and abuse, and report any cases to the authorities. Protection is a parent's responsibility, and reporting cases will ensure accountability.

To community leaders / Traditional rulers:

- Promote community engagement: Engage with community members, imams, and Islamic scholars to promote awareness and engagement on the importance of education and child welfare. Community engagement will create a supportive environment.
- Support policy initiatives: Support policy initiatives aimed at addressing the Almajiri system and promoting child welfare. Support will enhance policy effectiveness.
- Advocate for education: Advocate for education and promote the importance of education in their communities. Advocacy will help prioritize education.
- Encourage community-based initiative: Encourage community-based initiative that support education and welfare of Almajiri children. Community-led initiatives are often more effective.
- Collaborate with government officials: Collaborate with government officials to ensure effective implementation of programs aimed at addressing the Almajiri issue. Collaboration will enhance programs effectiveness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive, cooperative, and coordinated approach to address. The system, which was originally designed to provide Islamic education to children, has degenerated into a social menace, perpetuating poverty, illiteracy, disorganized and disorderly, and insecurity in Northern Nigeria.

The consequences of the Almajiri problem are far-reaching, including terrorist recruitment, crime and violence, social unrest, health risk, and human rights violations.

However, with concerted efforts from government, NGOs, communities and international organizations, it is possible to address the Almajiri problem and create a more secure and prosperous future for Northern Nigeria. The way forward for Northern governors includes establishing modern Islamic schools, enforcing compulsory education, providing economic support, lunching awareness campaigns, and collaborating with NGOs to provide support services to Almajiri children.

Moreover, addressing the Almajiri problem requires a holistic approach that tackles the root causes of poverty, unemployment, and social inequality. It requires investing in infrastructure development, promoting vocational training, and providing alternative education options. It also requires engaging with traditional leaders, communities, and international organizations to promote alternative education options and discourage the Almajiri system.

Furthermore, the Almajiri problem is a ticking time bomb that requires urgent attention and action. If left unchecked, it will continue to perpetuate poverty, illiteracy, and insecurity in Northern Nigeria, undermining the region's potential for growth and economic development.

Additionally, with concerted efforts and a comprehensive approach, it is possible to address the Almajiri problem and create a more promising path for the children of Northern Nigeria. The Northern governors have a critical role to play in addressing the Almajiri problem, and their efforts will be crucial in determining the success of initiatives aimed at tackling this issue. By working together with governments, NGOs, Communities, and international organizations. Northern governors can make a significant difference in the lives of Almajiri children and create a more secure and thriving tomorrow for Northern Nigeria.

The study's results have significant implication for policy and practice. The Nigerian government, policy makers, and stakeholders must work in concert to implement reforms that prioritize the welfare and education of Almajiri children.

In the words of Nelson Mandela, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". By investing in education and addressing the Almajiri problem, Northern governors can unlock the potential of their children and create a brighter future for their region.

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