



THE VULNERABILITY OF ALMAJIRI DEMOGRAPHIC COHORTS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: UNPACKING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, LEADERSHIP, AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the relationship between ineffective leadership and the risk of social exclusion of the Almajiri demographic cohort in Nigeria within the context of sustainable development. It's interesting to note that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been promoted by the UN. These goals are essential for the country to provide its population with opportunities for overall development. Regrettably, a large portion of the Almajiri population has historically been unable to access formal education due to the poor leadership in the country, and their traditional educational system has not provided them with the skills needed to engage in the creation of human capital, which will enable them to contribute to the innovation and socioeconomic competitiveness of the Nigerian state. This limits the country's prospects of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals by reinforcing a cycle of ignorance, poverty, and social exclusion. The objective of this article is to determine the degree of social exclusion and poverty experienced by the Almajiri cohorts in northern Nigeria, with an emphasis on the northern senatorial zone of Adamawa State. The article's main source of data is Key Informant Interview (KII), where social exclusion is used to quantify the qualitative dimensions of poverty. According to the study, social exclusion or poverty were potential risks for 73% Almajiris surveyed in the three local governments that were chosen. Thus, the recommendation centers on leaders' efforts to determine the proportion of Almajiris who are unable to meet their needs at a given level and on taking further action to enhance the social inclusion of demographic cohorts of Almajiris and meet the requirements of contemporary sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Leadership, Almajiri, Poverty, Social Exclusion, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Social exclusion and poverty are alarming problems for modern societies. They are obstacles in achieving sustainable social development (Sinding, 2009; Okech *et al.*, 2012; Spencer and Komro, 2017; Marchand *et al.*, 2019; Prattley *et al.*, 2020; Lin *et al.*, 2020). These are complex and multidimensional phenomena that depend on economic, sociological, cultural and political factors (Annoni *et al.*, 2015). Important factors in this respect include economic conditions (income inequalities, material poverty), features impeding the use of common social resources (disability,

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addiction, etc.), no access to appropriate institutions (functional negligence, spatial mismatch). The above list does not include all the factors. The risk of poverty has a clear territorial dimension and contributes to lowering the quality and standard of living (Atkinson, 2013; Jonsson *et al.*, 2016; Šoltés *et al.*, 2016; Węziak-Białowolska, 2016; Rupeika-Apoga *et al.*, 2019)

Against the above background, it is not an overstatement to posit that, the educational system of Almajiris in the Northern part of Nigeria has not manifested essential indices requires for sustainable development. There are technical skills required for the achievement of sustainable development in the country. The large number of Almajiris are found incapable of doing certain works but this is not because they do not have capabilities but because opportunities are not being given to them to utilize their potential. This problem continues to surface as a result of the fact that the Almajiris have not related to industrial and socio-economic needs of the society (Bala, 2018).

The mainstream literature contends that, the system has not contributed to socio-economic and infrastructural development of the country as a result of the fact that, there is no meaningful attention given to it by the policy makers (Imam, 2015; Bala, 2018). Even character building which was an essential element that constitute the very foundation of the system has gradually evaporated from it in the sense that system cannot boldly claim the character building because of the allegation that the system produces destitute who cannot offer meaningful contributions to the society. In other words, the character building inherent with the system remains questionable because the system neither caters for the livelihood of the teachers (mallams) nor the students (Almajiris) which make them considered as people living below the required standard of living.

To this end, the spatial scope of this study concerns the Almajiris demographic cohorts in the northern region of Nigeria. Despite relatively close geographical locations (as they are only found in the northern Nigeria), as well as the similarities in the historical and cultural identity of the unit of analysis, there are significant differences in shaping of the socio-economic factors within the cohorts in question. This paper therefore intends to explore the nexus between poor leadership and the risk of social exclusion of the Almajiris demographic cohort in Nigeria'

2. Conceptual Clarification

The concept of sustainable development

The concept of sustainable development was not used then, between 1975 and 1995 the European Economic Community introduced numerous projects and pilot programmes to increase social cohesion. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) has presented a widely accepted definition of sustainable development. This is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their needs. According to this theory of development, economic and social development are interrelated.

Sustainable development is therefore associated with the promotion of a dynamic economy, full employment and a high level of education, health care, social and territorial cohesion, and environmental protection – in a world of peace, security, and respect for cultural diversity (Council of the European Union, 2006).

Conceptualizing Social Exclusion

The concept of social exclusion and its multiple manifestations and drivers have been the focus of a growing literature. Galabuzi, (2004) defines social exclusion as “a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state.” Chakravarty & D'Ambrosio (2006) emphasize the relative processual nature of exclusion, underscoring the terms in which individuals and social groups are excluded from taking part in society. Levitas, (2000)

more explicitly focus on the presence of discriminatory practices such as racism, xenophobia, and ageism that hinder individuals' participation in economic, social, and political life. Byrne (2005) also emphasizes the implications of exclusion in terms of lack of access to markets and services, as well as limited political, cultural and social participation. Thus, according to Cuesta, López-Noval, & Niño-Zarazúa, (2024) the deprivations that emerge from social exclusion vary widely, although they result from three overarching dimensions first, people are at risk of exclusion because their identities diverge from established norms and customs. These identities can reflect gender, age, race, caste, and ethnic characteristics, or religious and political affiliations.

The concept of Poverty

Research into poverty has a long history, exemplified by the seminal work of Booth and Rowntree who studied poverty in England in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Ruggeri Laderchi et al., 2003). Both defined poverty as being more than simply lacking financial resources: adverse living conditions were also an important feature. A lack of financial resources was accompanied by poor health and housing, a lack of education and few services (Shucksmith, 2012). Poverty is a widely used term, but one that is given many meanings: the definition of poverty is often contested, and the concept has evolved and changed over time (Pantazis et al., 2006: 14). Misturelli and Heffernan's discourse analysis (2010) of 159 documents focusing on poverty in developing countries demonstrated how usage differed over time and between stakeholder groups, and how many different constructions of the problem were to be found under the rubric of 'poverty'. Pragmatically, Van den Bosch (2017), claims that 'it cannot be defined in any way one likes and goes on to propose the 'everyday meaning of the word' as most appropriate. Veit-Wilson sees this customary meaning as 'the enforced lack of resources demonstrably needed for respect and inclusion' (Veit-Wilson, 2006: 318).

The concept of Almajiri

The term Almajiri has an etymological background from the Arabic word *Almuhajir* meaning someone who migrated. In Northern Nigeria it is therefore used to describe persons mostly very young who migrate usually from rural areas to the cities in search of Islamic knowledge, for the purpose of learning or for the sake of advocating Islamic knowledge. The Almajiri system is bed rooted in ancient culture of migration where on yearly basis people mostly from rural areas usually after harvest gather their school age male children and entrust them under the care of one Islamic teacher in order that he may teach them the basics of Islam knowledge through the Holy Qur'an, under a strict discipline and austere manner of living (Muhammad, 2014).

The pupils from these types of Qur'anic schools are general known as Almajiris which the plural term of the concept of Almajiri is. These pupils are therefore relocated to urban areas where they lived in camps called "tsangaya" mostly at the outskirts of the cities to avoid domestic distractions, by the teachers. The Almajiris are therefore subjected to semi-regimented life in this camp with the purpose to inculcate into them the spirit of self-reliance, discipline and self-denial called "az-zuhdu" (Bambale, 2003). Under this system both the Mallam (Teacher) and Almajiris, lives at the mercy of the local population for left-over food known as "sadaqa" (which is alms), however, in most cases such food may not be enough to feed the entire pupils hence they on daily basis have to go out to solicit for more food from the neighborhood, if obtain the food is taking back to the camp to share collectively (Yusha'u, Tsafe, Babangida & Lawal, 2013).

3. Sustainable Development Goals and Poverty Reduction in Nigeria

Eradicating poverty remains one of the major challenges within the globe. The aim of achieving this poverty reduction was not fully achieved during the implementation of MDGs. After obligating SDGs, different countries in the world started to demonstrate these goals into their development planning for effective

implementation. The goals become the goal that countries across the globe put efforts towards actualizing. Nigerian government started to integrate them into its development planning for effective implementation. Some of its general commitment towards achieving the goals include the effort made at the legislative level to facilitate the process of SDGs by establishing two committees in the national assembly: There is a Senate Committee to ensure appropriate allocation of funds for the SDGs and there is also a committee on the same subject matter in the House of Representatives; Establishing the office of the senior special assistant to the president on SDGs, which is a legacy of MDGs that has the responsibility to oversee poverty reduction programs; and Inter-ministerial committee on SDGs established to see the smooth interface between the agencies, departments, and ministries (Nayyar, 2012).

To address goal 1 of SDGs, which is “no poverty”, several strategies were adopted by the Nigerian government to help in reducing poverty in the country. For instance, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the National Safety Investment Program (NSIP) to address hunger and poverty in the country in 2016, allocating \$1.3 billion of its budget to the institution of the first phase of its social safety nets system (Osondu-Oti, 2020). The program was established deliberately as an effort to accomplish the goal, where the vulnerable and the poor are targeted. The packages under this safety program include Cash Transfer, which reached approximately 300,000 poor and vulnerable households; N-Power Program that also empowered 500,000 youths within the age bracket of 18-35; and the National Home-Grown School Feeding Program which provided 9.9 million within 33 states and empowered 107,862 cookery staff across the states. Poverty eradication remains a global challenge. Though there is a rapid achievement in combating poverty in countries like India and China, African country such as Nigeria’s war against poverty is proven very difficult (Osondu-Oti, 2020).

4. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in two complementary sociological theories that is the Social Exclusion Theory and Structural Functionalism, which together provide a robust lens for understanding the entrenched marginalization of Almajiri demographic cohorts in Northern Nigeria, and how this marginalization intersects with leadership failures and sustainable development deficits.

Social Exclusion Theory

Social Exclusion Theory posits that certain groups are systematically disadvantaged because they are denied access to resources, rights, and opportunities that are essential for full participation in the social, economic, and political life of a society (Silver, 1994; Levitas, 2005). In this context, the Almajiri children represent a structurally excluded population—marginalized by their socio-economic status, cultural background, and geographic location.

Their exclusion manifests across multiple dimensions:

- Economics: Limited access to employment and entrepreneurial opportunities due to lack of formal education and vocational skills.
- Social: Stigmatization and lack of inclusion in mainstream social institutions such as modern schooling and healthcare.
- Political: Absence of representation or targeted policy efforts at the subnational level to improve their welfare.

By using this theory, the study interprets the Almajiris' vulnerability not as a product of individual or parental failure, but as a systemic consequence of institutional neglect and policy exclusion, exacerbated by weak governance and leadership indifference.

Structural Functionalism

Structural Functionalism views society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability (Durkheim, 1893; Parsons, 1951). Institutions such as education, family, religion, and

government are expected to perform specific functions that sustain social order and facilitate social integration.

In the context of this study, Structural Functionalism is used to interrogate the dysfunctionality of the state and its failure to integrate the Almajiri system into the broader national development agenda. Rather than performing their stabilizing roles:

- The family unit is overwhelmed by poverty, leading to the outsourcing of children into informal religious institutions.
- The education system is bifurcated, offering little integration between traditional and formal curricula.
- The government fails to deliver inclusive policies or enforce existing frameworks designed to uplift marginalized groups.

As a result, these dysfunctions contribute to the systemic vulnerability of Almajiri children, pushing them further to the periphery of society and undermining the nation's broader sustainable development goals.

Theoretical Synthesis

Together, Social Exclusion Theory and Structural Functionalism offer a dual perspective:

- Social Exclusion Theory explains why Almajiris are marginalized, focusing on the systemic barriers and institutional failures.
- Structural Functionalism explains how societal structures have failed to evolve and integrate traditional institutions into the national framework for education, welfare, and development.

5. Materials and Methods

This section intends to beam a search light on the methodology adopted to explore how poor leadership contributes to the risk of poverty and social exclusion of the Almajiris demographic cohorts. In this section the underlying paradigm underscoring the philosophical assumptions as well as the research design were explained. As suggested by Cresswell (2013), the nature of the problem which prompts the study, the underlying objectives and philosophical orientation of a particular discipline are very crucial in determining the research method to be adopted. As such, taking into cognizance the above factors, this study intends to adopt the qualitative data approach, in which the main instrument adopted for data generation is in-depth face-to-face interview. The researcher applied an ethnographic research design in which data was collected through direct observations, in-depth Key Informants Interview (KII) and as such a total number of 30 informants were interviewed cutting across the students from Almajiris School, Islamic clerics, parents of the Almajiris cohorts, the Mallams (teachers of Almajiris School) and members of the academics. The study was conducted between April 2024 to August 2024, the study was conducted in Mubi North Local Government, Maiha Local Government and Michika Local Government all in Adamawa Northern senatorial zone; these local government were selected based on the population of Almajiris. The information from the interview was transcribed and analyzed thematically.

5. Data presentation and analysis

The objective of this paper is to explore how poor leadership contributes to the risk of poverty and social exclusion of the Almajiris demographic cohorts. With a population approaching 200 million, of which 60 percent are under 25 years of age, Nigeria could be home to 400 million people by 2050, according to UN projections. While the country went through a spurt of accelerated economic growth (above 5 percent per year) between 2000 and 2011 because of a global commodities boom, the period of relative prosperity brought few new jobs and was not transformational. Nigeria's employment picture, years of schooling and school attendance have failed to improve. Since these factors impact poverty directly, the country's prospects for reaping the benefits of a demographic dividend do not look good in the years ahead.

Ever since the country fell into a recession in 2016, Nigeria's economic growth has been feeble, particularly in non-oil sectors. Almost half of the population (around 94 million people) live on less than \$1.90 a day, giving Nigeria the dubious distinction of world leader in extreme poverty concentration. Over the last two years, its per-capita GDP has shrunk and in the third quarter of 2018, unemployment stood at an estimated 23.1 percent. Despite some recent improvements, Nigeria's business environment remains shoddy, with the country ranking 131 out of 190, according to the World Bank Doing Business 2020 Report

In terms of social development. Nigeria ranks 152 out of 157 countries in the World Bank Human Capital Index. A child born there today is expected to reach only 34 percent of its productivity potential in adulthood due to malnutrition and poor access to education and health services. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the country has the second-highest prevalence of stunted children, estimated at 32 percent among those under five years of age. Nigeria is also among the countries with the most children out of school, with only 61 percent of those aged between six and 11 regularly attending primary school where the rate of enrollment into Almajiri schools in the entire northern Nigeria is higher than the enrollment rate into formal schools which signify a huge problem for the region. An investigation conducted by the National Primary Education Commission (NPEC) in 2009 revealed that pupil's enrollment into Almajiri schools was three times higher than the enrollment rate in formal schools in Zamfara and Sokoto states both in the northwestern geo-political zones.

Research shows that by 1921, about 30,411 Almajiri schools system existed in northern Nigeria, where by 2006 the number of graduates from the Almajiri school system was roughly put to be above seven million (Aluaigba, 2009). At present it is estimated that the entire northern Nigeria, is occupied by about 9.5 million Almajiris in (Aghedo, 2013) which is two hundred thousand less than the entire population of Sweden (Fazel & Grann, 2015). It is also estimated that the north-east geographical zone is occupied by about half of these which roughly is about 4.2 million (Aghedo, 2013). It is imperative to note also that the northeast geo-political zone is the headquarters of the Boko Haram terrorist.

Another investigation conducted in 2008 by UNICEF in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Education revealed a similar trend where the Almajiri school system recorded an enrollment rate of about 514, 264 in Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, Kano, Borno and Bauchi states in comparison to 54,434 which was the total number of public primary schools enrollment in the entire country, which is a clear manifestation of how the Almajiri schools system has taking the front seat in Northern Nigeria (Goodluck & Juliana, 2012).

Inherent in this is a serious challenge, in the sense that the Almajiri school system as it is constituted today is a shadow of its former self as the system which was supposed to inculcate Islamic virtues into children has gradually degenerated into inferior institution epitomized by inhumane and unwholesome practices which tend to subject the pupil to all sort of slavery and menial jobs which was hitherto not part of the system. At present, a typical pupil from the Almajiri school system is identified by their unsavory look characterised by tattered clothes and roaming the streets begging for alms carrying a plastic plate. The Almajiris were seen as a social nuisance, hence often chased away by decent people. They loiter around petrol stations, markets, people houses and restaurants, in most cases sleeping on bare floors or used pieces of cardboard, they innocently roam the street watching as other privileged children enjoy parental care and comfort which in most cases create the feelings of alienation (Loimeier, 2012).

These incidences of social exclusion and poverty invariably compel the Almajiris to become errand boys of the wealthy families and restaurant owners with the view to having access to food, shelter and clothing, while significant number of them tend to engage in criminal activities such as drugs peddling, pick-pocket and political, thuggery while the unbearability to such meaningful and cruel life compel some of them to commit suicide, as was the case in 2011 in Niger state where a young Almajiri got himself hanged (Aghedo & Eke, 2013). Against the above backdrop, two factors have emerged as themes from the KII linking poor leadership with destitution of the Almajiris cohorts in the North-Eastern Nigeria which also help in achieving the third objective of this paper. The first theme anchored around lack of sustainability policy while the second factor hinged on the lack of will by the political leaders in those states.

Lack of sustainability policy

In this study, informants were forthcoming on the significance of lack of sustainability plans for the Almajiri educational system and how it contributed to the deprivation and alienation of the cohorts in question. Evidence shows that even though the government's initiatives provide a framework for addressing poverty, the strategies did not have significant impact on the lives of destitute Almajiris in the Northern part of the country. Where the reason for ineffectiveness and lack of sustainability of these initiatives is majorly poor leadership. This study found that the government has been making a lot of desired efforts in fostering Almajiri system through Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies (NBAIS). However, there is nothing concrete in the policy aspect regarding skill acquisition especially in the aspect of entrepreneurial activities to improve socio-economic condition of Almajiris which can enable them to contribute immensely to the national progress and sustainable development in the country.

For instance, as observed by one of the informants:

“Inclusion of vocational training will make the Almajiris system to be functional and contributive to sustainable economic development in the country. However, there is lack of vocational training package in the Almajiri educational policy”

Another informant has this to say:

“In order to achieve meaningful change, it is paramount to initiate and implement economic policy that will improve the condition of destitute Almajiri children in the Northern part of the country. Unfortunately, no such policies exist in Nigeria today”

The same view was shared by an informant from Mubi when he opined that:

I think the Almajiris education policy is very shallow when it comes to sustainable development. Because the only initiative that can be instrumental in development is the inculcation of a small-scale business or entrepreneurship policy among Al-Majiri children will unfortunately it is not there.

The interview responses highlight a widespread perception among informants that the Almajiri education system lacks a coherent and actionable sustainability framework. This aligns with existing literature, which emphasizes that without concrete vocational or entrepreneurial components, educational interventions often fail to address the socio-economic needs of vulnerable populations (Sam, 2014; Erhun, 2015). Informants stressed that despite efforts by UBEC and NBAIS, there is a glaring policy vacuum regarding skills acquisition and economic empowerment, critical for sustainable development. As observed by one informant: “Inclusion of vocational training will make the Almajiris system to be functional and contributive to sustainable economic development in the country...” This is consistent with the views of Adebayo (2013), who argues

that any education system that does not integrate economic empowerment risks perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion.

It is on this note that literature contends that, to achieve overall sustainable development in the country, it is important for the government to utilize holistic approach in improving social, economic and ecological dimensions in the country. It is noteworthy to say that the essence of sustainable economic growth is to close the gap between the rich and the poor and improve the economic condition of the poor. Negligence of solving the problem of poverty and street begging among Almajiri children in the North will consequently affect social orderliness and political stability. , economic viability is necessary in attaining economic sustainability because it requires participation of stakeholders or decision makers, economic policy formulators and all sectors of economy in order to reduce the rate of poverty among the citizens as literature contends (Sam, 2014; Erhun, 2015).

Lack of will by the political leaders in states

Political will is one of the major factors that determine the survival and sustainability of any government initiative in Nigeria. Political will is defined by DFID as “the determination of an individual political actor to do and say things that will produce a desired outcome’ (DFID 2004, p. 7). Political will is essential to the process of sustainably implementing Almajiri education policy in Nigeria. As the government administration changes from one political party to another, there seems to be a lack of enthusiasm on the part of some succeeding state administrators in replicating these programmes in their respective states (This Day 2017). Informants in this study were categorical about how the poor accountability architecture of the state negatively affect policy implementation in the sense that the inability of the country to develop a vibrant economy and infrastructure needed for growth and development of citizens has always been blamed on the federal government, absolving states and local governments who receive huge allocations from the Federal Accounts Allocation Committee (FAAC) every month.

A recent report by The PUNCH Newspapers revealed that given the significant revenue surge following the removal of petroleum subsidies states have seen a positive increase in revenue allocations (Elegbe, & Adeyemo, 2024). Data from the Federation Accounts Allocation Committee showed that within a year, about 10 states received over 50 percent more in monthly allocations, while 12 others saw a 40 percent increase.

Amidst those huge allocations, National Bureau of Statistics had, in its National Multidimensional Poverty Index report, disclosed that 133 million Nigerians are multi-dimensionally poor, the question remains: what have the northern states governors done with the funds in addressing poverty and destitution in their respective states.

An informant asserted that:

If state executives strictly adhered to their constitutional responsibilities, the public outcry against bad governance, often directed at the Federal Government, might not be as intense. Nigerians frequently overlook that the country’s revenue is distributed among the Federal, State, and Local Governments based on an agreed percentage since the advent of this democratic experience on May 29, 1999. Therefore, each level of government is expected to judiciously use these funds for the people’s benefit, including paying salaries, developing key economic sectors, providing infrastructure,

welfare programmes, education, health services, and security. This combination fosters a well-run nation where governance centres on the citizens' wellbeing—an essence of democracy practiced worldwide.

Another informant echoed on the same point:

Take, for instance, the ongoing demand for responsive and responsible governance, where the blame is primarily directed at the central government. Amidst the clamor for change, people conveniently ignore that state governors have received increased revenues compared to the previous administration. With the removal of fuel subsidies and a substantial rise in monthly allocations to states and LGAs, it is surprising that few question the governors on how they manage these increased resources.

It is clear that except for the federal Government efforts no state governor has come up with any concrete policy which specifically targets the Almajiris cohorts. In fact, even the fund earmarked by the federal government for the Almajiris are in most cases misappropriated by the state governors. For instance, an investigation was carried out by Leadership, a Nigerian newspaper, on the implementation of Almajiri model schools across the northern Nigerian states to decide how the approach is being actualized it was found that, except for Zamfara State, there is almost no facilities usage taking place. The investigation found that the greater part of the Almajiri schools have not been completed or even those completed were non-operational. A significant number of the schools were closed not long after opening. Those that stayed open recorded a very low enrollment rate of the students in comparison to the traditional tsangaya system.

Informant from among the members of the academics expressed concern:

The state governors are not responsive to the needs and aspirations of the Almajiri Cohorts for instance there is no social security and welfare packages for the disadvantage groups such as the Almajiri cohort, they are not employable in both the private and public sector and those with some entrepreneurial skills among them do not have access to any financial assistance from their respective state governors.

In another response by an academic, he asserted that:

The nexus between the Almajiri cohorts and the Boko haram elites are purely cultural and ideological but governance and political factors make this bond even stronger in the sense that the hypocritical attributes of our governing elites towards governance grossly isolate them from the rest of society.

Moreover, many public schools in the North do not differ significantly from the Almajiri schools themselves; usually under-funded, with depleting structures, and a high student to teacher ratio. So, even when there is a desire by the children and parents to attend more inclusive schools, access to a better learning environment is limited. Implicit from the above is that the state governors do not seem to manifest the political will requires in achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. As advance by this informant:

The responsibility for being a governor is formidable, and much is expected from anyone aspiring to be one. Governors bear key responsibilities, clearly outlined in

the constitution. They are tasked with executing laws, making appointments to state judiciary and other regulatory bodies managing the state's day-to-day affairs, and performing other duties to improve the citizens' living conditions. Unfortunately, a significant number of them do not seem to have such political will.

The above evidence show that state governors are performing below expectations in providing the quality leadership requires for the achievement of sustainable development in northern Nigeria. A leadership that will make an effective change for social transformation which would put in place social institutions whereby transparency and accountability are considered as their core values. Hence, state governors are expected to play a significant role in this regard especially in putting necessary structure and institution in place towards improving the education and socio-economic conditions of Almajiri cohorts in the North. For instance, entrepreneurship skills and entrepreneurial activities can be introduced into systems to make the learners to be self-independent after graduation.

This becomes clear when we consider the views of the Almajiri cohorts in this study where the significant numbers of them expressed concern about how poor leadership confers on them some serious predicaments such as poverty and social exclusion. The below exemplified the comments made

An informant from the Almajiri cohorts argued that:

In Nigeria today, we the Almajiri are the worse set of citizens we are made politically and economically irrelevant by our politician.

It is therefore clear from the above that the Almajiri cohorts are grossly dissatisfied with their status under the contemporary Nigeria state under which they continue to suffer stigmatization and social exclusion from the Government. This is because the Almajiri demographic cohorts are excluded youth cohorts, susceptible to stereotyping, criticized for their cultural upbringing, and experiencing a disguised feeling of helplessness and hopelessness, with restricted access to communal systems of mutual assistance. Their purported unhygienic, criminality sexual abuse and intellectual inadequacy are the frequently discussed subjects in the academic literatures where the Almajiri cohorts are epitomized by poverty and chronic unemployment resulting from lack of education and skills needed for better life. Below response by an Almajiri is indicative of this:

The government is responsible for our destitution because they do not provide Skills acquisition programs for us so that we can earn a living like those with School certificates. In another interview an Almajiri argued that: I blame our parents, but the largest share of the blame goes to the Government because they fail to encourage our parents to enroll us in the western school thereby depriving us a better future like other youth.

Among the Almajiri cohorts, the feeling of deprivation regularly originates from three factors: the loss of historical status as an esteemed group, the annihilation of traditional political and social structures and the

ruthless and wanton corruption by the political leaders that frequently leaves their people in destitution. The following responses from a community leader are indicative of this:

The Almajiri School was the most revered and respected institution, but the government gradually bastardized the entire system, thereby transforming it into a mere institution to produce beggars and menial laborers.

A mallam (teacher in the Almajiri School) has this to say:

The Almajiri school is not supposed to be treated and regarded as it is today, because it represents one of our religious and cultural heritage but unfortunately modernization and the so-called civilization have all contributed to relegating it to the background.

Interviewees consistently pointed to the lack of political will among state-level leadership as a barrier to the success of Almajiri policy implementation. This aligns with DFID's (2004) definition of political will as a key driver of policy success. Respondents cited poor accountability, misappropriation of funds, and disinterest in replicating federal initiatives as core challenges. This echoes findings by Mustapha (2010) and Ogbeidi (2012), who link political inertia and corruption with systemic governance failures. As one academic noted, 'There is no social security and welfare package for the disadvantaged groups such as the Almajiri cohort...' This is mirrored in Adejumbi's (2004) observation that governance in Nigeria often excludes the masses from the benefits of democracy, thereby entrenching inequality and social unrest.

Respondents from the Almajiri demographic cohorts expressed strong dissatisfaction with their exclusion from national development plans. Their views reflect a deep sense of marginalization linked to systemic neglect, consistent with Sam (2014), who describes poverty in Nigeria as an outcome of state failure to integrate disadvantaged populations. Statements like, 'We the Almajiri are the worst set of citizens...' illustrate the psychological impact of prolonged exclusion. These sentiments reflect Adepoju's (2015), argument that youth marginalization contributes to societal instability and makes groups susceptible to radical ideologies.

It is, therefore, apparent from the above that there is an interlocking relationship between leadership failure to empower the Almajiri cohorts. Leadership ought to incorporate empowerment and improvement in the living conditions of the common masses, however, such is not the case in Nigeria in the sense that the significant portion of the citizens continues to experience hardship. In Nigeria, one of the major factors responsible for poverty is the inability of the political class to adequately adhere to the essential precepts of democracy and constitutionalism (Ogbeidi, 2012). As Mustapha (2010:2) appropriately observed, this circumstance "has given rise to abuse of power, brazen corruption, disregard for due process and the rule of law, intolerance of political opposition, abuse of the electoral process and the weakening of institutions." This negates the tenant of good governance, which presupposes "the procedure of social engagement between the rulers and the ruled in a polity" (Adejumbi, 2004).

5. Discussion of Results

The Almajiris are grossly abandoned by their parents and exploited by members of the public as they end up facing a future lifestyle woven by poverty and hardship. This is because the Islamic education they receive do not appear to equip them with the skills needed to survive in the harsh and capitalist-oriented modern economy

that the nation operates and, thus, cannot offer them profitable employment. The Almajiris are trapped in the vicious circle of poverty, disease and hunger. For instance, in this study hunger was found to be the major problem of 73.0% of the Almajiris in the study area, it was found that out of 260 Almajiris interviewed, 82.3% were children from peasant families. The harsh conditions they experience daily can make them indulge in any unlawful act to enable them to meet their needs. Almajiris in Northern Nigeria roam about dirty, tattered, bare foot, pale with flies pecking on their cracked lips and dry faces which is filled with rashes and ringworm. These are clear cases of poverty situation of Almajiris in Nigeria.

To this end, the findings of this study reveal a grim reality of systemic neglect and socio-economic marginalization of Almajiri children in Northern Nigeria. The data show that 73.0% of the Almajiri respondents identify hunger as their most pressing challenge, while 82.3% come from peasant families, underscoring their extreme vulnerability and poverty. This finding aligns with existing literature which identifies Almajiris as among the most economically and socially excluded groups in Nigeria (Sam, 2014; Erhun, 2015. Abbo, Zain, Z. M., & Ali, 2017). From the perspective of Structural Functionalism, this condition illustrates a breakdown in the societal structures meant to protect and integrate all citizens, particularly vulnerable youth. The family, religious institutions, and the state key agents of socialization and welfare have failed to provide the support needed to ensure that these children transition into productive adulthood. The family unit has been weakened by poverty, while the state has failed to institutionalize a functional support system for Almajiris.

The Social Exclusion Theory further offers insight into how Almajiris are marginalized economically, socially, and politically. Their exclusion is not only material manifesting in hunger, disease, and homelessness but also symbolic, evident in the stigmatization and public disregard they face. Their Islamic education, though valuable in its spiritual essence, does not provide them with market-relevant skills needed to participate in Nigeria's capitalist economy. This aligns with the findings of Abdu and Abubakar (2018), who argue that Almajiri children are victims of both educational inadequacy and systemic state failure.

Moreover, the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) is instructive here. It posits that true development must be measured not only by economic growth but by the extent to which individuals have the freedom and capacity to lead the lives they value. In this study, Almajiris clearly lack the basic capabilities necessary for functioning: education, nutrition, shelter, healthcare, and the opportunity for economic participation. Their ragged appearance "dirty, tattered, bare foot, pale with flies pecking on their cracked lips and dry faces" is not just a health issue, but a moral indictment of a society that has institutionalized child neglect. Empirically, this study supports findings from UNICEF (2020) and Mustapha (2010), which underscore the risks posed by leaving millions of out-of-school children without skills, protection, or social integration. These risks include susceptibility to radicalization, petty crime, child labor, and continued intergenerational poverty. In summary, the Almajiris are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and neglect, exacerbated by inadequate educational structures, parental disempowerment, and the state's weak political will. Unless meaningful reforms are introduced, including a sustainable and skill-based Almajiri education policy, their continued exclusion poses serious threats to national security, public health, and social cohesion.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

In proffering a solution, it is first important to change the way we view and treat the Almajiris, not as "one of them" but as "one of us", not as potential terrorists but as victims of a failed system.

The idea behind the Almajiri system may be worth preserving, but the schools ought to be properly integrated into the educational sector and their curriculums upgraded and revised in a way that allows the students get both Quranic and secular education. This blend is critical to ensure that they develop economically useful skills. Local communities and religious leaders also have a role to play in governing the system. The 165 Almajiri Schools built by ex-President Goodluck Jonathan have come to nothing as most of the structures have become dilapidated due to negligence, while some were never used at all. This is typically due to lack of sustainability plans, and a lack of will by the political leaders in those states and the current administration to see to the continuity and funding of those schools. The Kaduna State Government recently revealed plans to enroll up to 145,000 children in school, 14,738 of which are Almajiris, and 70,167 girls expected to be engaged in 480 schools and 2,420 teachers. If successful, this can be replicated across affected states in Nigeria.

Adequate funding should be made available from the annual education budget to finance the education for marginalized and disadvantaged groups in Nigeria. This will help in recruiting committed teachers as well as procuring useful materials for the programme. The same spirit backing formal education should also back other forms of education targeted towards special groups. More collaboration should be made with both local and international research agencies in gathering data related to the nomadic education in Nigeria. Experts and researchers from the universities should be involved for accuracy and reliability.

Against the above backdrop, the following recommendations were advanced:

Adopt an Inclusive National Perspective on Almajiris

Policymakers, educators, and the public must shift the perception of Almajiri children from being “others” or “threats” to being integral citizens deserving of equal opportunity and protection. Public education campaigns and inclusive policies should foster empathy and reintegration.

Integrate Almajiri Schools into the National Education Framework

The Almajiri education system should be formally incorporated into the national education sector. Curricula must be revised to offer a balanced blend of Qur’anic and conventional education, including literacy, numeracy, science, civic studies, and vocational training. This integration will equip Almajiris with market-relevant and employable skills.

Empower Community and Religious Leadership in Governance

Community-based participation must be encouraged through the engagement of local leaders, religious scholars, and parents in the management and oversight of Almajiri education. This participatory governance model will enhance accountability, cultural sensitivity, and long-term sustainability.

Revive and Sustain Existing Almajiri Infrastructure

The 165 Almajiri schools established under former President Goodluck Jonathan should be audited, rehabilitated, and strategically utilized. Federal and state governments must commit to regular maintenance, teacher recruitment, and curriculum delivery across these centers.

Ensure Dedicated Budgetary Allocations

Annual education budgets should specifically earmark funds for marginalized and disadvantaged groups, including Almajiris. This funding should support teacher training, instructional materials, infrastructure, and school feeding programs to encourage enrollment and retention.

Replicate Successful State Models Nationally

Initiatives such as the Kaduna State model, which targets over 145,000 school enrollments including 14,738 Almajiris, should be closely monitored, documented, and replicated across other northern states where the Almajiri population is concentrated.

Foster Research and Data-Driven Interventions

The Federal Ministry of Education and the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) should collaborate with local universities, international research agencies, and development partners to collect reliable data on nomadic and Almajiri education. This will enable evidence-based policymaking and program evaluation.

Strengthening Institutional Commitment and Political Will

Sustainable implementation of reforms requires strong political will at all levels of government. Legislators and executives must commit to the continuity of Almajiri programs beyond election cycles and ensure transparency and accountability in fund management.

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