



COVID-19: Protecting the rights to life of the Almajiris amidst the pandemic

A Position Paper

CONTEXT

In response to the challenge posed by the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the government of Nigeria has responded with relevant policies and regulations with other measures as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution. Some of these responses which came from the federal executive council, the Central Bank of Nigeria and the National assembly include the signing of the COVID-19 Regulations of 2020 which declared COVID-19 a dangerous infectious disease; adaptation of the Social Investment Policy to COVID-19 responses; NGN100 Billion Credit Support for the Healthcare sector; passage of the Nigeria Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill 2020 by the Federal House of Representatives among other responses. Citizens have witnessed provision of palliative, massive awareness creation, border surveillance and lock down supported by stay at home campaigns as well as provision of testing and isolation centres for quarantining and treatment within the limited capacity of the Country's Health Management System. The Federal Government has sustained Conditional Cash Transfer to already enlisted beneficiaries, provision is also made for the continuation of Home-Grown School Feeding Programme for children at home within enlisted host communities. However, a cluster among the most vulnerable Nigerians; the Almajiris are left out and are far removed from benefiting from these palliative responses. The Almajiris who constitute 9.5 million (UNICEF 2014) of the country's children within the ages of 3-14 are left out, not mentioned, at risk of exposure to the virus and will therefore require immediate attention and support.

A cluster among the most vulnerable Nigerians; the Almajiris are left out and are far removed from benefiting from these palliative responses.

The Almajiris who constitute 9.5 million (UNICEF 2014) of the country's children within the ages of 3-14 are left out, not mentioned, at risk of exposure to the virus and will therefore require immediate attention and support

Situation of the Almajiri children amidst COVID-19

- The Almajiri children are part of the citizenry that are minors, mostly left to cater for themselves thus depending on door to door begging for survival. The implication of this is that within the lockdown period, these children are subjected to unending starvation and are without protection thereby increasing their risk of exposure to incidence of outbreak of the epidemic in their locations.
- The Almajiri children in this category are far removed from all major

sources of information on COVID-19 and the opportunity of parental guidance on the messages and guidelines. Implication of this is that they are not able to protect themselves and will not be able to observe any social or physical distancing or access medical services should they contact the virus.

- Many of these Almajiri children are already exposed to poor health conditions, the probability of contacting the virus, given their situation, is very high to the extent of exponential morbidity and mortality curve.
- The Almajiri children, given their options for survival and feeding such as begging, accepting other persons' leftovers, handling waste disposals for people, are most vulnerable as the likelihood of their getting contact with infected persons as beggars who take whatever comes to them as food or support from those willing to give, expose them to the virus and could serve as potential carriers.
- It is noteworthy that some state governments have commenced repatriation of the Almajiri children

to their states of origin. This option however is not without its own risk. Transporting the children with no control over public transport and social distancing measures, might expose them to group contagion. Repatriating them from the cities back to their respective homes may exclude those who do not have a home to return to; these include victims of broken homes, orphans and those who are on the streets because they are not accepted at home. Such cases of rejection could further increase their exposure to stigmatisation and psychological disorientation which could further increase their vulnerability in the case of an outbreak of the COVID-19.

- It is observed that while government has invested enough energy and resources in ensuring that law and order is kept during the crisis period, there is no evidence of special attention to issues affecting children, especially the Almajiris and other street kids, who are more vulnerable in periods of emergency which offer a supportive environment for potential predators.

This, therefore, is a call for deliberate inclusion of the Almajiri children in Nigeria's COVID-19 response system.



Recommendations

In view of the above, **Advocates for the Rights of Almajiris**, a forum of NGOs in Nigeria hereby calls on the Federal & Sub-national Governments to as a matter of urgency identify and include the Almajiris and Street Children in the COVID-19 response mechanism. We hereby call on governments, institutions of state, the responding private sector and non-governmental organisations at all levels to prioritise the following for the care of the Almajiri children in this period:

1. Expansion of the social register to include Almajiri children In line with the president's directive on expansion of beneficiaries' list, it is recommended that the Almajiri children are included in the provision of food and non-food items within strategic locations for the Almajiris. However, it is important to reiterate that handing over food items and cash on their behalf does not translate to access to the services by the children unless accountability is enforced.
2. Provision of temporary shelter to protect the children from contacting the virus while ensuring access to food and safety within recommended distances. And that adequate provision be made to protect the children from exposure to diseases, contamination, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuses.
3. That where shelters are provided for these street kids, that such facilities are organised in ways that they are gender responsive, inclusive and pay detailed attention to the various forms of diversities among the children such as sex, age and disabilities.
4. That there should be a proper mapping of the Almajiri centres and an audit should be made to ensure that where the children are still in the care of the mallams, there should be enforcement of adherence to all health guidelines.
5. Where returning of the Almajiri children to their original place of birth and or to their parents or guardians becomes necessary, proper safety and protection of children on transit must be ensured in line with child protection and safeguarding principles. This should include among others:
 - Trusted escorts on transit, with adequate training or instruction on documentation in the case of need for referrals to psychological first aid for any of the children.
 - Provision of temporary camps at destination pending when parents identify and take custody of their children,
 - Provision of adequate protective items including sanitizers and other personal facilities for the children and caregivers while on transit.
6. As States embark on fumigation exercises, they should take into cognizance that some children sleep under the bridges and inside dry culverts/waterways. Proper

handing over food items and cash on their behalf does not translate to access to the services by the children unless accountability is enforced

...adequate provision be made to protect the children from exposure to diseases, contamination, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuses.

... proper mapping of the Almajiri centres and an audit should be made to ensure that where the children are still in the care of the mallams, there should be enforcement of adherence to all health guidelines

checks, evacuation and relocation to safe shelters should therefore be done before the commencement of the exercise.

7. States and Local Governments to ensure inclusive mobilisation and support for all citizens to include Tsangaya Centres within the LGAs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is essential that Nigeria recognises the situation of the Almajiris as children made vulnerable as a result of actions and decisions of adults without their having the option of giving or withholding their (the children) consents. It is therefore incumbent on the state and its agencies and institutions to treat the Almajiris as children with legitimate rights to social services and protection in line with the Convention on the Rights of Children, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and other conventions that the country has signed and ratified.



- Pic: Nigerian Tribune

Advocates for Dan Almajiri is a collective response to the issues of Almajiri Children, formed by a network of Non-Goovernmental Organisations (NGOs) comprising of Street Child, Plan International Nigeria, ActionAid Nigeria, Riplington Education Initiative (REI) and Almajiri Child Rights Initiatives

Contact Address