

## LEAD PAPER 1

### THE ALMAJIRI SCHOOL SYSTEM AND CHILDREN'S FARM LABOUR AVAILABILITY IN SOKOTO STATE: WHAT ROLE FOR URBAN AGRICULTURE?

BY

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#### Abstract

*The study examined the extent of practice of sending children to traditional Qur'anic school (Almajiri schools) by rural and urban households in two local government areas (LGAs) in Sokoto State, and to see the effect of this practice on farm labour availability and farm output. To achieve the objectives of the study, data were collected from 100 randomly sampled household heads each from Isa (representing rural) and Sokoto North (representing urban) LGAs of Sokoto State. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics in addition to student T test and Z test for differences between proportions. The results show that up to 69% of all respondents engaged in sending children away to traditional Qur'anic schools. However, the proportion (93%) sending children to such schools was significantly higher ( $P < 0.01$ ) for the rural LGA than the urban LGA (45%). Similarly, the number of children sent per household was significantly higher ( $P < 0.01$ ) for the rural LGA. Major proportions of the respondents agreed that sending children away affected farm labour availability and output negatively. Furthermore, most of the children who have graduated from such schools took to professions other than farming. It was, therefore, concluded that the Almajiri school system constitutes a drain on farm labour availability. To return some of the labour to agriculture, it was suggested that the children and their teachers should be mobilized and empowered to participate in urban agriculture.*

#### Introduction

In Sokoto State, like most other areas in Nigeria, family members constitute the most significant source of farm labour. Family members usually consist of men, women and children. However, while in many other areas (particularly outside the Hausa north) women are actively involved in farming, the practise of *purdah* (women seclusion), which restricts women to their matrimonial homes during the day time, effectively limits the availability of women for farm work in the state. This implies that the bulk of the farm work is left for the male adults and children. Since the female children are mostly occupied with assisting their mothers with domestic tasks such as fetching of water and fuel wood, and in selling the products of women income generating activities (Baba and Umar, 2001), their involvement in farming is also limited. Therefore, only male children seem to be actually available to assist the male adults in farm operations

However, a possible source of competition for the availability of male children for farm work is the Almajiri phenomenon. Almajiri (pl. *Almajirai*) is a Hausa word derived from the Arabic word *Al-Muhajir* meaning "the migrant". The word is used to describe children attending traditional Qur'anic school far away from home (parent). In such

school system in northern Nigeria, children are sent usually to distant locations to acquire Qur'anic and Islamic knowledge under a teacher. This practice is as old as the history of Islam in the area. In recent times, however, this school system appears to have transformed from a "learning" into a "begging" institution. A common sight in most northern Nigeria towns, is of groups of small children here and there on the streets in thread-bare clothes, carrying their food bowls and staring desperately at people, hoping for alms from some compassionate fellows that would reduce the level of hunger devastating them National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute (NCWD, 2001). The children are exposed to great risks of hunger, poverty and diseases, and spend more time begging than learning. The transformation of the *Almajiri* from a learner into a beggar has inevitably resulted in the continuous decline of the quantity and quality of knowledge from the system (NCWD, 2001). Furthermore, some of the children eventually turn to crime.

It is evident from the foregoing therefore, that the *Almajiri* system of education has become a burden to the society. The question is: in addition to being a social ill, does the system also significantly affect availability of children's labour for farm work? And is there a way of re-engaging the children in agriculture, to minimize the social ill and return some of the labour back to agriculture? This study attempts to provide answers to these questions using two local government areas in Sokoto State as a case study. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- (1) determine the extent of involvement of rural and urban households in sending their children to traditional Qur'anic schools
- (2) ascertain the effect of this practice of farm labour availability and output.
- (3) determine the proportion of *Almajirai* graduates who return to farming after graduation, and
- (4) derive policy implications of the findings of the study with particular reference to urban agriculture.

### Methodology

The study was conducted in Sokoto State which lies in the extreme northwestern part of Nigeria within latitudes  $11^{\circ} 30' - 13^{\circ} 50' N$  and longitude  $4^{\circ} - 6^{\circ} 40' E$ . It is bordered in the north by Niger Republic, in the east by Zamfara State, and in the south by Kebbi State. Majority of the inhabitants of the State are Muslims and farming (both arable crop and livestock) is the main occupation of the people. The state consists of 23 local government areas (LGAs).

Data for the study were obtained from 200 household heads sampled from two LGAs in Sokoto State. It was the strategy of the study to compare the practice of sending children to *Almajiri* schools between households in urban and rural areas. Therefore, one LGA was randomly sampled from the two urban LGAs and another from the remaining LGAs, which are largely rural. The selected LGAs are Sokoto North (Urban) and Isa (Rural). In each LGA, two electoral wards were randomly selected and in each ward, 50 household heads were randomly chosen, bringing the total sample size to 200. The wards selected in Isa LGA were Dan Zanke and Turba, while those selected in Sokoto North were Magajin Rafi and Waziri B wards.

From the selected respondents, data were collected on a wide range of issues including the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents, the extent of practice of sending children away from home for Qur'anic education, how this affects farm labour availability

and farm output, the places where children are sent, the ages at which they are sent, the occupation chosen by the children on graduation, and so on.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, aided by student T test and Z test for differences between two proportions

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Respondents***

Table 1 shows the distributions of respondents with respect to age, occupation, number of children and farm size. The table shows that majority (about 64%) of the household heads interviewed were about 40 years old, suggesting that youth headed households were minimal. This is good for the study since it implies that those interviewed were old enough to have many children and to have enough experience with *Almajiri* school system to provide adequate insight into the phenomenon. The results show that the rural household heads (mean age of 47 years) were older than their urban counterparts (42 years). This difference in age is statistically significant ( $P < 0.01$ ).

Table 1 further shows that almost all (98%) of the rural respondents (i.e. those from Isa LGA) were farmers while occupation was more varied in the urban LGA. This is expected since alternative means of livelihood, other than farming, are limited in the rural areas of Sokoto State, in contrast to what obtains in the urban areas. About 36% of urban respondents were in one form of business or another 32% were civil servants and only 25% were farmers.

**Table 1: Distribution of the respondents according to some socio-economic characteristics**

| Variable                       | Isa   |       | Sokoto North |       | Total |       | T value*           |
|--------------------------------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|--------------------|
|                                | freq  | %     | freq         | %     | freq  | %     |                    |
| <b>Age (yrs)</b>               |       |       |              |       |       |       |                    |
| < 20                           | 0     | 0     | 2            | 2.08  | 2     | 1.02  |                    |
| 21 - 30                        | 6     | 6     | 16           | 16.67 | 22    | 11.22 |                    |
| 31 - 40                        | 23    | 23    | 24           | 25.00 | 47    | 23.98 |                    |
| 41 - 50                        | 35    | 35    | 28           | 29.17 | 63    | 32.14 |                    |
| > 50                           | 36    | 36    | 26           | 27.08 | 62    | 31.63 |                    |
| <b>Total</b>                   | 100   | 100   | 96           | 100   | 196   | 100   |                    |
| <b>Mean</b>                    | 47.45 |       | 42.30        |       | 44.93 |       | 3.44               |
| <b>Occupation</b>              |       |       |              |       |       |       |                    |
| Farming                        | 98    | 98    | 24           | 25.06 | 122   | 62.24 |                    |
| Business                       | 1     | 1     | 35           | 36.46 | 36    | 18.37 |                    |
| Civil servant                  | 0     | 0     | 31           | 32.29 | 31    | 15.82 |                    |
| Qur'anic                       |       |       |              |       |       |       |                    |
| Teaching                       | 1     | 1     | 4            | 4.17  | 5     | 2.55  |                    |
| Student                        | 0     | 0     | 2            | 2.08  | 2     | 1.02  |                    |
| <b>Total</b>                   | 100   | 100   | 96           | 100   | 196   | 100   |                    |
| <b>Farm Size (ha)</b>          |       |       |              |       |       |       |                    |
| ≤ 2                            | 34    | 34.69 | 6            | 25.00 | 40    | 32.79 |                    |
| 2.1 - 4                        | 38    | 38.78 | 7            | 29.17 | 45    | 36.89 |                    |
| 4.1 - 6                        | 15    | 15.31 | 2            | 8.33  | 17    | 13.93 |                    |
| 6.1 - 8                        | 5     | 5.10  | 1            | 4.17  | 6     | 4.92  |                    |
| > 8                            | 1     | 1.02  | 1            | 4.17  | 2     | 1.64  |                    |
| Cannot tell                    | 5     | 5.10  | 7            | 29.17 | 12    | 9.84  |                    |
| <b>Total</b>                   | 98    | 100   | 24           | 100   | 122   | 100   |                    |
| <b>Mean</b>                    | 3.42  |       | 2.66         |       | 3.27  |       | 1.60 <sup>ns</sup> |
| <b>Mean Number of Children</b> | 7.65  |       | 6.34         |       | 6.95  |       | 2.01 <sup>**</sup> |

\* for significant difference of means between the two local government areas

\*\*\*, \*\*, ns = significant at  $P < 0.01$ ,  $P < 0.05$ , not significant, respectively.

Rural respondents also had larger number of children (mean of 8) than urban respondents (6). Perhaps, the urban respondents are more easily reached with government campaigns on population control and are more enlightened. Therefore, they probably recognize the need to have fewer children. An alternative explanation could be that being older, the rural respondents have had more time to produce more children.

The table shows that the farmer-respondents were small-scale farmers with majority (about 70%) cultivating not more than four hectares. In fact, the mean areas cultivated in the rural and urban LGAs were 3.42 and 2.66 ha, respectively. This difference in farm sizes was however, not significant.

### Extent of Participation in the *Almajiri* System

The degree to which sending children away affect their availability for farm work will depend on the popularity of the practice. Attempt was therefore, made to establish the proportion of the household heads sampled who sent their children away from Qur'anic schooling, the number of children sent, places to which sent and time taken to graduate from the schools.

Table 2 shows that a major proportion of the respondents engaged in sending their children to traditional Qur'anic schools. The practice was however, much more popular in the rural area than the urban area. The proportion of rural households sending their children (93%) significantly exceeded that of the urban households (45%). This is expected since there are several Qur'anic schools in Sokoto town and parents may prefer their children to attend such schools on a "day" basis rather than send them away to other places. Furthermore, the urban dwellers are likely to be more enlightened about the dangers of exposing little children to poor nutrition, poor health, extreme poverty and destituteness that have come to symbolize the plight of the *Almajirai*, and would want to minimize exposing their children to such unnecessary risks.

The mean number of children sent was computed first for all respondents and then only for the respondents sending their children. Table 2 shows the mean for all rural respondents (2.06) significantly ( $P \leq 0.01$ ) exceeded the mean for all urban respondents (0.91). Similarly, the mean per rural household sending also significantly ( $P \leq 0.10$ ) exceeded the mean per urban household sending their children away. These results show that not only was the proportion of rural households sending higher, but also the number of children sent per rural household exceeded the number sent per urban household.

**Table 2: Some indicators of extent of participation in *Almajiri* System**

| Item  | Isa  | Sokoto North | Significance            |
|---|------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Proportion of respondents sending children away (%) | 93   | 44.79        | Z = 7.35***             |
| No. of children sent (mean for all households)      | 2.06 | 0.91         | t = 6.69***             |
| No. of children sent (mean per household sending)   | 2.20 | 1.85         | t = 1.76*               |
| Age at which sent (yrs)                             | 6.03 | 7.70         | t = -1.86*              |
| Time taken to graduate (yrs)                        | 5.29 | 5.36         | t = -0.26 <sup>ns</sup> |

\*\*\*, \*, <sup>ns</sup> = significant at  $P < 0.01$ ,  $P < 0.10$ , not significant, respectively.

Table 2 shows that children were generally sent at the age of about six to seven years. This is twice the age suggested by some authors (e.g. Sule-Kano, 2000). Yet, it is still a very young age when parental care is critical. It is also shown in the table that the children spend about five years before graduating from the schools.

Table 3 shows the distribution of the respondents' *Almajiri* children according to places (states) to which they have been sent. The results show that Kano State received the largest proportion of the Qur'anic school children followed by Sokoto and then Zamfara States. But the fact that only about 19% of the pupils remained within Sokoto State

suggests that the respondent prefer to send their wards to distant lands for learning. This may be connected with the widely held notion that the children do not concentrate on learning if they are close to the home. But it may also imply that the ability of the parents to monitor the condition of their children frequently is sacrificed. Hence, most of the time, the parents may be unaware of the squalor in which the children live and the suffering they are exposed to. Furthermore, the far distance will make regular provisioning for the children difficult and will limit the ability of the children to visit home to assist their parents on the farm. The far distance, and perhaps the believe that children have to be totally out of sight of the parents for them to concentrate on learning, probably explains why only about 24% of those who sent their wards to such schools reported ever visiting them

#### Effect on Labour Availability for Farm Work

Apart from the social problems created by the parent day traditional Qur'anic school system, is it possible that it could have economic consequences in terms of restricting children's participation in farming? To answer this question, the respondents were asked a number of questions and requested to answer "yes" or "no". The questions and responses are presented in Table 4.

**Table 3: Distribution of *Almajirai* according to the states sent**

| Variable | Isa   |       | Sokoto North |       | Total |       |
|----------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|
|          | Freq. | %     | Freq.        | %     | Freq. | %     |
| Adamawa  | 2     | 0.97  | 1            | 1.28  | 3     | 1.06  |
| Bauchi   | 9     | 4.37  | 0            | 0.00  | 9     | 3.17  |
| Borno    | 13    | 6.31  | 2            | 2.56  | 15    | 5.28  |
| Gombe    | 4     | 1.94  | 1            | 1.28  | 5     | 1.76  |
| Jigawa   | 17    | 8.25  | 2            | 2.56  | 19    | 6.69  |
| Kaduna   | 14    | 6.80  | 5            | 6.41  | 19    | 6.69  |
| Kano     | 36    | 17.48 | 22           | 28.21 | 58    | 20.42 |
| Katsina  | 8     | 3.88  | 3            | 3.85  | 11    | 3.87  |
| Kebbi    | 17    | 4.37  | 7            | 8.97  | 24    | 8.45  |
| Niger    | 9     | 8.25  | 8            | 10.26 | 17    | 5.99  |
| Plateau  | 4     | 1.94  | 0            | 0     | 4     | 1.41  |
| Sokoto   | 44    | 21.36 | 11           | 14.10 | 55    | 19.37 |
| Yobe     | 3     | 1.46  | 4            | 5.13  | 7     | 2.46  |
| Zamfara  | 26    | 12.62 | 12           | 15.38 | 38    | 13.38 |
| Total    | 206   | 100   | 78           | 100   | 284   | 100   |

Table 4 shows that majority (56%) of the farmer respondents who sent their children away agreed that the practice create farm labour shortage. Furthermore, a major proportion (60%) felt that they would have cultivated larger farm sizes if not for the practice. A significant proportion (64%) also felt that higher output would have been realized if the children were not away. In all the questions, therefore, the proportions answering "yes" exceeded those answering "no". These results are not surprising given the significant role played by Nigerian children generally in agricultural production. For instance, a survey conducted in Oyo State showed that family children/youths accounted for 27% of the total labour used in cassava production, from land clearing to harvesting (Ikpi and Hahn, 1989). Other authors (Arokoyo, 1992; Adedoyin et al., 1998) have also stressed the significance

of children in agricultural production. This significance is further accentuated in Sokoto State where women are restricted from farm work, leaving only the men and the children.

**Table 4: Respondents' views on how sending children to Qur'anic schools affect their farming (%)**

| Question  | Isa   |       | Sokoto North |       | Total |       | z-value <sup>a</sup> |
|---|-------|-------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|----------------------|
|   | Yes   | No    | Yes          | No    | Yes   | No    |                      |
| Does your children's being away create farm labour shortage?          | 56.04 | 43.96 | 55.56        | 44.44 | 55.93 | 44.07 | 0.05 <sup>m</sup>    |
| Would you have cultivated larger plot if your children were not away? | 60.44 | 39.56 | 59.26        | 40.74 | 60.17 | 39.83 | 0.21 <sup>m</sup>    |
| Would you have obtained higher output if your children were not away? | 64.83 | 35.16 | 59.26        | 40.74 | 63.56 | 36.44 | 0.63 <sup>m</sup>    |

<sup>a</sup> for significant difference between the proportions answering "yes" in the two Local Government Areas.

<sup>m</sup> = not significant.

The implications of the *Almajiri* system for agricultural production could also be gleaned from the choice of places of residence and occupation of the *Almajirai* after graduation. In most cases, the children are sent to urban centers away from the farms. Table 5 shows that out of the 134 rural children graduated, only about 31% returned to the home LGA. In contrast, of the 41 urban children graduated, up to 63% returned to the home LGA where there are diverse occupations apart from farming. This gives the impression that many children did not return to the rural areas because farming is the predominant occupation there.

This impression is further confirmed by the choice of occupation of the children after graduation. Table 6 shows that only 16% of the rural, and 7% of the urban children took to farming upon graduation. All the remaining were lost to other occupations. This is not surprising, considering the fact that there is the usual tendency for youths to underrate the profession of farming. This is particularly true of children who were taken away at a very early age before they could learn the art of farming under their parents and the dignity in labour associated with it. Having been exposed to the urban life at a very impressionable age, there is every tendency that the children upon graduation, would opt for occupations that obtain in urban areas, rather than farming which in any case they are likely to consider backward.

**Table 5: Distribution of children who graduated from the Qur'anic schools according to present places of residence**

| Variable      | Isa   |       | Sokoto North |       | Total |       |
|---------------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|
|               | Freq. | %     | Freq.        | %     | Freq. | %     |
| Adamawa       | 2     | 1.49  | 3            | 7.32  | 5     | 2.86  |
| Bauchi (town) | 0     | 0     | 1            | 2.44  | 1     | 0.57  |
| Gombe (town)  | 0     | 0     | 1            | 2.44  | 1     | 0.57  |
| Ibadan        | 4     | 2.99  | 2            | 4.88  | 6     | 3.43  |
| Imo           | 5     | 3.73  | 2            | 4.88  | 7     | 4.00  |
| Isa           | 41    | 30.60 | 0            | 0     | 41    | 23.43 |
| Kaduna(town)  | 5     | 3.73  | 1            | 2.44  | 6     | 3.43  |
| Kano(town)    | 18    | 13.43 | 1            | 2.44  | 19    | 10.86 |
| Katsina(town) | 2     | 1.49  | 0            | 0     | 2     | 1.14  |
| Kebbi         | 4     | 2.99  | 1            | 2.44  | 5     | 2.86  |
| Lagos (town)  | 5     | 3.73  | 1            | 2.44  | 6     | 3.43  |
| Maiduguri     | 9     | 6.72  | 0            | 0     | 9     | 5.14  |
| Niger         | 1     | 0.75  | 0            | 0     | 1     | 0.57  |
| Sokoto(town)  | 33    | 24.63 | 26           | 63.41 | 59    | 33.71 |
| Yobe          | 1     | 0.75  | 1            | 2.44  | 2     | 1.14  |
| Zamfara       | 4     | 2.99  | 1            | 2.44  | 5     | 2.86  |
| Total         | 134   | 100   | 41           | 100   | 175   | 100   |

**Table 6: Distribution of children who graduated from the Qur'anic schools according to their present occupations.**

| Town/State        | Isa   |       | Sokoto North |       | Total |       |
|-------------------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|
|                   | Freq. | %     | Freq.        | %     | Freq. | %     |
| Farming           | 22    | 16.42 | 3            | 7.32  | 25    | 14.29 |
| Business          | 60    | 44.78 | 17           | 41.46 | 77    | 44.00 |
| Civil servant     | 7     | 5.22  | 1            | 2.44  | 8     | 4.57  |
| Qur'anic Teaching | 18    | 13.43 | 13           | 31.71 | 31    | 17.71 |
| Student           | 27    | 20.15 | 7            | 17.07 | 34    | 19.43 |
| Total             | 134   | 100   | 41           | 100   | 175   | 100   |

### **The Role of Urban Farming**

The *Almajiri* school system is a practice in northern Nigeria whereby children are sent usually to distant lands to obtain Qur'anic education. The *almajirai* or the children sent on the schooling, are however, known to many as beggars (more especially teen-aged beggars), street kids and wanderers (Sule-Kano, 2000), because of the way they move about in urban cities begging for food and money. They are indeed a societal ill. But it has been indicated that begging only emerged as part of the practice in recent times (Mustapha, 1997). In other words, in the past the practice was not an unnecessary burden on the society since their migration was usually preceded by concrete arrangements for feeding and accommodation (Khalid, 1998), and the host communities generously assisted



the children and their teachers with what they needed willingly (Abdulwahab, 1999; Ahmed, 1999). Under such a hospitable and sympathetic environment, Khalid (2000) argued that the *Almajirai* had no cause to resort to begging. But all these have changed with time and the pupils have to beg to survive. According to Sule-Kano (2000), a good number of the children have become delinquents and have turned to crime.

Considering the deteriorating situation, there is doubtlessly an arguent need to address the plight of the *Almajirai*. One strategy that is worthy of consideration is to see if the labour of the children could be diverted to agricultural production in urban areas where they are mostly found. This way, the labour that is being removed from agriculture in the rural areas would be returned back in the urban centers. Furthermore, it would generate food and income for the *Almajirai* and their teachers, which would alleviate their hunger and poverty, thereby ridding the society of their burden. By being engaged in agriculture, some of the children may also develop interest in the farming profession upon graduation. Fortunately, agriculture, particularly vegetable crop production, is very popular in most urban centers of northern Nigeria. The challenge is how to properly organize the *Almajirai* and provide them access to resources (particularly land and finance) to enable them participate in urban farming along with their schooling rather than wander about the streets begging and being exposed to unnecessary risks.

#### **Conclusion and Policy Implications**

The study has shown that the practice of sending children to traditional Qur'anic schools is quite widespread in the area. This, apart from exposing the children involved to great risks at such a tender age, also contributes to farm labour constraints. Furthermore, children sent to such schools rarely return to farming after graduation. To return the children to farming at an early age and teach them the profession, their involvement in urban farming is advocated. To achieve this, there is the need for sensitizing and mobilizing the Qur'anic teachers, the children and their parents for participation in urban agriculture. Efforts should thereafter be made to assist the teachers in acquiring land and soft loans for urban agriculture participation in urban farming, it is hoped would provide independent income for the schools and eliminate the need for street begging.

As a further strategy for improving the welfare of the children and their teachers, there is the need for the state government to become more actively involved in the collection of *Sakat* (that is, the poor due), which is obligatory on all Muslims who have the means. Part of such Zakat could then be distributed to the Qur'anic schools. This was the practice in northern Nigeria before the arrival of the British colonialists and it contributed to the sustenance of the schools.

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