HARNESSING THE POTENTIALS OF ALMAJIRI COHORTS FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *The Almajiri system over the years has been linked indirectly with radicalization, unemployment and other social vices in Nigeria. This negates the initial ideals of the system as introduced a long time ago. This study focused on harnessing the potentials of Almajiri cohorts for entrepreneurship development. The study was conducted in two states in the northern part of Nigeria using focus group discussion. The findings reveal that the Almajiri system is undesirable as majority of discussants were tired of the system. The findings also show that a lot of the cohorts have entrepreneurship potentials in them. Therefore, the study recommends that government of states involved should make concerted efforts to equip the cohorts with entrepreneurship skills and values in order to harness entrepreneurship potentials in them.*

Key words: Almajiri cohorts; entrepreneurship development; potentials; culture; system.

1. Introduction

A lot of literatures exist on the Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria. An examination of some of the literatures indicate different narratives on the origin, purpose and desirability of the system. For instance, Awofeso, Ritchie & Degeling, Purefoy (2012); and Soyinka (2012) noted that the Almajiri system in itself serve as an instrument of radicalization. Hoechner (2013); Higazi (2013); and Omeni (2015) observed a flawed link between Almajiri system and violence. Falola (2009); Danjibo (2009) argued that the economic destitution of the Almajiris render them vulnerable to radicalization and accordingly culpable of fierce rebellion. Usman, Zawiyah & Bashir (2017) posited that the Almajiri system in itself does not radicalized the Almajiri cohorts but it has indirectly contributed in producing large jobless youth cohorts with a strong sense of identity. In view of Usman et al (2017) study and the need to ensure that youths are gainfully employed, this study focused on harnessing the potentials of Almajiris for entrepreneurship development with a view of combating joblessness among youths and curbing the challenge of insecurity most especially in the northern part of Nigeria. Almajiriin as used in Hausa language (singular) is derived from an Arabic word "Al-muhajirun" (plural) meaning migrants or "Al-mahajir" a pilgrim or wanderer (Mohammed & Yusuf, 2015). It is a name given to migrants who seeks Quranic knowledge. Almajiri refers to children aged 4-18 years among others who leave their families in the pursuit of Islamic education particularly in northern Nigeria and some parts of West Africa (Bambale, 2003; Adamu, 2010; Al- Gazali, 2012). It must be noted that some group of individuals now move from one street to another with plates in their hand begging for food early in the morning and in the evening under the guise of Almajiri without genuine interest in Islamic education or affiliation to a non-formal Islamic school.

2. Statement of Problem

The Almajiri system really calls for concern as able bodied youths between the ages of 10 -18 years that subscribe to this system are found roaming about daily begging for food from house to house. They knock at people's gate, chanting and reciting verses to persuade residents to come to their aid. These Boys are not registered in any formal school and they are not learning any trade. One then wonders what becomes of them when they grow older without a skill, formal education or trade. A number of studies suggested that they become tools in the hands of unscrupulous elements who recruit them easily into terrorist organizations, luring them with money and other promises. It is therefore necessary to explore the possibilities of harnessing the potentials of these youths for entrepreneurship development.

3. Objectives of Study

The objectives of this study is to explore the possibilities of harnessing the potentials of Almajiris for entrepreneurship development. Other specific objectives are to:
1. examine the opinion of Almajiri cohorts on the desirability of the system
2. identify the potentials inherent in the Almajiri cohorts.
3. highlight entrepreneurship opportunities available for Almajiris

4. Entrepreneurship Development and Culture

Entrepreneurship development entails the process of improving the skills and knowledge of *people with business ideas and potentials* through various entrepreneurial trainings and programs. Entrepreneurship development is concerned with entrepreneurial behavior, the dynamics of business set-up, development and expansion of the enterprise. Entrepreneurship development (ED) refers to the process of enhancing entrepreneurial skills and knowledge through structured training and institution-building program (UNDP, 1999). It basically aims to enlarge the base of entrepreneurs in order to hasten the pace at which new ventures are created. This accelerates employment generation and economic development. Anthropologists view entrepreneurship as well as other social processes as cultural processes (Greenfield and Strickon, 1986). In particular, the important role of culture, norms and traditions has been demonstrated, which, although do not inhibit entrepreneurship, but can do so. From an anthropological perspective, attention to social and cultural factors related to the creation of a new business has provided interesting contributions to the understanding of entrepreneurship.

According to Morris (2005), there is a major difference in cultural values and norms across various cultures which influence entrepreneurial activity and behavior. Hence, entrepreneurial activities which may be appealing to Almajiri cohorts domiciled in the northern part of Nigeria may be different from entrepreneurial activities that may be of interest to a person domiciled in the southern part of Nigeria due to cultural differences. Mueller (2000) noted that culture includes patterns of values, ideas and symbolic features which shape the human behavior and it is the process that distinguishes one group from another through a system of values. Cultural values are the essential elements that influences entrepreneurship behaviors of people in a society (Turker and Selcuk, 2009). Culture is a scaffold through which individuals can shape their behavior as well as entrepreneurial activities in society; its influence on entrepreneurship development cannot be overemphasized. Culture provides support to deal with day to day issues that confronts entrepreneur (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). Culture encompasses social norms; these social norms in line with Ijaz et al. (2012) is the unrecorded rules of conduct of a group which impact the individual-level decision-making process. It must be noted that the Almajiri system practiced in Nigeria is cultural and peculiar to the North. Hence, cultural dimension to entrepreneurship development cannot be overemphasized.

5. Theoretical Orientation

Social identity theory is applicable to how Amajiri cohorts see themselves. The Social Identity Theory (SIT) posited that our definition of who we are; is a function of our similarities and differences with others. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979; 1986), social identity theory attempts to explain intergroup solidarity and discrimination which favors in-group that people belonged and contrary to the other group. In other words, cognitive processes define the membership of a group through social categorization, social identification and comparison. This can be understood in the sense that the Almajiris have a shared belief, solidarity and modus operandi which distinguish them from other groups. Ellemers & Haslam (2012) observed that social identity theory is a "grand" theory whose core premise is that in many social situations, people think of themselves and others as group members, rather than as unique individuals. This is true in the light of the Almajiri cohorts who see themselves as members of a group with specific roles to play.

The theory argues that social identity underpins intergroup behavior and sees this as qualitatively distinct from interpersonal behavior. It delineates the circumstances under which social identities are likely to become important, so that they become the primary determinant of social perceptions and social behaviors. The theory also specifies different strategies people employ to cope with a devalued social identity. This largely explains the continued existence of the Almajiri system in spite of efforts to re-orientate the cohorts in line with modern standards of acceptable behavior. It is indeed necessary to explore ways of channeling the enormous potentials of the Almajiris for entrepreneurship development so as to ensure an egalitarian society devoid of young street beggars.

6. Methodology

This study is purely descriptive as it adopts a qualitative method to elicit information from respondents. The respondents are basically Almajiri cohorts selected purposively from different locations in two major states in the northern part of Nigeria. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used to harvest the opinion of the Almajiri cohorts on different issues of interest. The Almajiris always walk together in groups. So, it was easy to get between 6 - 8 persons for discussion at the same time. The purpose of the study was explained to them before the commencement of discussion. Light refreshments was provided to gain their attention because most of them were approached for discussion while they were moving from one house to another begging for food. Services of research assistants who are well versed in Hausa language were secured to give room for effective communication. The identity of discussants as well as their locations were not disclosed for security reasons due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Focus group discussion with participants were recorded, transcribed and rearranged. The main ideas were reviewed to identify comments which occur more than once. Intelligent transcription was used to present the salient comments.

7. Discussion of Findings

Information elicited from respondents goes a long way in unravelling the opinion of Almajiri cohorts about their current situation and way of life. In response to questions on the desirability of the Almajiri system. Some of the cohorts stated as follows:

"It is good and desirable; I don't really see anything wrong in what I'm doing, I am not stealing or taking what does not belong to me. I only beg for food without forcing anyone" **(Discussant 1, Location C)**
"I am not happy with this daily routine of begging for food in the morning and at night. I really wish I could have another option. It is undesirable to me". **(Discussant 6, Location A)**

"I am tired of this kind of lifestyle, sometimes I go hungry for a whole day without food. It is painful that people have food at home but they are not willing to help us. The system is undesirable for me". **(Discussant 8, Location D)**

"I have no desire for begging this same way every day. Sometimes, people do give us stale food. The type of food they cannot give their children. But sometimes, we could be lucky to get fresh and good foods from kind hearted individuals. It is undesirable". **(Discussant 2, Location B)**

"There is nothing to be happy about as far as I'm concerned. Our master would ask us to look for food. We move from place to place asking people to give us food in the name of God. Sometimes, we get small quantity of food and may have to struggle and fight among ourselves to get a portion of the food. I am tired of this; it is undesirable". **(Discussant 5, Location D)**

"It is desirable, I have no other option, I have to do what my friends are doing. We go to a Beans cake seller or cooked rice seller's shop early in the money to beg for food. They are always kind enough to give us food. Sometimes, their customers' may buy food for us". **(Discussant 2, Location A)**

The response of majority of the Almajiri cohorts as stated above indicated that the system is not desirable for the cohorts and some of them are tired of the lifestyle that the scheme has to offer. However, there are a number of the cohorts that loves the system as they have no other alternative to the way of life offered by Almajiri system.

In a bid to identify the potentials inherent in the Almajiri cohorts, discussants noted that they are capable of doing a lot of things. Some of them are interested in business (buying and selling), some of them have good artistic skills. In fact, one of them was able to produce a free-hand portrait of one of the research assistants. Some of the young boys are interested in carpentry, tailoring, motorcycle and car mechanic among others. Some extracts from the discussion is as follow:

"I am good at repairing things most especially toys and other household equipment picked from the refuse dump". **(Discussant 3, Location D)**

"For me, I like drawing. I can draw anything I see or imagine. Please give me a paper and I will draw an image that look so much like you". **(Discussant 7, Location A)**

"I will like to be a Business man selling Rice and Beans. I will make a lot of money and I will help people that are poor". **(Discussant 5, Location C)**

"I always admire Bricklayers that build houses. I really wish to be like them. I would love to build fine houses for people". **(Discussant 2, Location B)**

"I love cars and I would like to be a mechanic. I once built a toy car with wood and other things. I wish to repair cars for people and if it is possible. I will be happy to build my own car". **(Discussant 8, Location A)**

It is interesting to note that most of the cohorts have great potentials and lofty dreams. However, these potentials may not be achieved if policy makers failed to take necessary steps in assisting and managing these young talented boys for the good of the society. So many entrepreneurship opportunities are available for the Almajiri cohorts. These includes the following among others:

- Carpentry/ Furniture work
- Tailoring / Fashion Design
- Painting/ Art work
- Bricklaying
- Mechanic
- Electrical Technician

- Business management (Buying and Selling)
- General Sales and Distribution

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The level of insecurity in Nigeria most especially in the north calls for concerted efforts. Jobless individuals are easily conscripted by people with criminal intentions to perpetrate nefarious activities. In view of this, it is necessary to harness the potentials of the Almajiris for entrepreneurship development in other to ensure that peace, orderliness and harmony reigns in the society. It is equally important to ensure that appropriate skills and trainings are provided for the Almajiri cohort in order to make them useful for themselves and for the society.

Government of affected states in the northern part of Nigeria should make policies targeted at training Almajiri cohorts to be self-dependent. Deliberate steps should be taken to equip them with entrepreneurship skills and values with a view of harnessing their potentials appropriately.

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