

Activating an All-Inclusive Alliance for the Almajiri



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Introduction

Poverty, insecurity and disease are siblings. Dare say, the Almajiri are the emblem of that state of affairs. These dishevelled children with slovenly habits awash the streets of northern Nigeria, bearing filthy bowls for soliciting alms. Between Q'uranic classes, they move in droves, accompanied by flies and numerous unseen vectors of disease; chanting verses of petition, praise and prayer (Fig. 1). They are the most severe brand of child wanderers the world over. Getting the Almajiri off the street has been the albatross haunting successive governments since the colonial era. This is largely because governments have taken aim at the wrong target.



Figure 1: Almajiri on a begging mission (Temitope Kalejaye, 2015)

If we consider the Almajiri as indigent students seeking sponsorship, we would understand the problem from the perspective of the victim. So far, it would seem, we have chosen to act like the British by stigmatising the victim and engaging in the unlikely pursuit of abolishing the Almajiri system. For over a centenary, Nigeria has applied the same solution to a problem, while expecting a different result. Indeed, if there is any lesson to be learnt from our educational history, it is that the Almajiri System, far from being scrapped, needs to be transformed, revised and coalesced with the mainstream system of education. Moreover, it must be done on the grounds of consensus.

The mendicant habit of the Almajiri of northern Nigeria says little about the quality of their education; rather, it speaks volumes about the multiple privations of the poorest children on planet earth. Thus, by addressing the manifold dimensions of their poverty, we would rescue the Almajiri from their present state of inhumanity and prepare them for a focused education. This can only be achieved upon the collective realisation that what is at issue is crass poverty and not the quality of Islamic education.

The dialectics of education

The Almajiri System is nobility gone awry. Beginning as a state-funded Islamic education programme in the 11th Century era of Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio, the Almajiri System espoused the ideal of raising boys educationally oriented in the tenets of Islam and grooming them for a decent Muslim adulthood (Aluaigba, 2009). Within this system, young boys would leave their homes to be mentored by an *Alarama* (teacher, now referred to as Mallam) for up to six years. It had a comprehensive Islamic curriculum, which guaranteed the memorisation of the Holy Q'uran, the internalisation of Islamic morality and the mastery of Sharia jurisprudence. As far as Islamic education went, the Almajiri System compared excellently well among the comity of Muslim Nations. By ethos, it was a noble and legitimate project, from whence came the choicest of northern Nigeria's elite and ruling class.

This flowering of Islamic intellection continued for eight centuries until 1903, when the British took up the reins. The colonial prescription was that western education alone could provide the requisite skills for comfortable livelihood. Hence, there was no reason to expend resources on what they considered inferior Islamic education. Therefore, the British axed state subventions to Almajiri schools. The seizure of funds to the Almajiri in favour of western education ignited the first sparks of the battle cry "Boko Haram!" (Western education is evil!), which at that time was a mere expression of discontent in northern Nigeria. The position of the Almajiri was that the ulterior motive of the colonial masters was to supplant any semblance of civilisation other than western. Indeed, the Arabic script had been domesticated as Ajami, which was used to write the first histories of the people of present day northern and south-western Nigeria as early as in the 10th Century AD (Hunwick, 2006; Abdul-Rahmon, 2012). They could not fathom the rationale behind the divestment from the Almajiri system on the pretext it provided substandard education.

Going by the aforesaid, it is clear that the misadventure of the Almajiri System is premised on two falsehoods: The thesis that Islamic education is incapable of delivering premium skill-sets (the British position); and the antithesis that Western Education is evil since it robs of Islamic values (the Almajiri position). Certainly, the way out of the woods would have been a synthesis of the acclaimed virtuous investments of Islamic education and the famed relevance of western education; but each side of the divide chose the path of mutual exclusivity. Unfortunately, the notion that both systems cannot cohere has persisted.

How big is the problem?

It is incongruous how with yam, tomatoes, onions and vegetables, northern Nigeria feeds the nation while 9 in 10 of her children go hungry and out of formal schooling. A UNESCO (2019) report - alongside the World Bank (2019) and UNICEF (2019) - puts the estimated number of Almajiri at 9.5 million. This is 72% of the 13.2 million out-of-school children in Nigeria, and 16% of the global total. That is to say that Nigeria, the world's seventh most populous country (Worldmeter, 2020), records the highest global child poverty population from a single ethnic group! Nigeria's street child figures trump those of China and India with five times her population. This is easily the sorest spot in our collective ignominy. Even when reckoned from the perspective of the proportion of children out-of-school, Nigeria



still ranks 6th in the world with 34%, sharing top ten slots with war-torn countries like Liberia, South Sudan, Afghanistan and Sudan (UNICEF, 2016).

Coming closer home, table 1 provides comparative figures of increase in GDP vis-à-vis the population variables of Almajiri, national out-of-school total, as well as national population. Whereas all variables have been on the increase since 2005, the Almajiri population seems to be in geometric progression.

Table 1: GDP projections relative to population variable, 2005-2020¹

Year	Estimated Almajiri Population	Out-of-School Children	Nigeria's Population	GDP (Billion Dollars)
2005	4.14m	6.9m	138.9m	176.1
2010	5.59m	8.6m	158.5m	363.4
2020	9.50m	13.2m	195.8m	446.5

¹ Compiled from UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank reports for the respective years.

As Fig. 2 illustrates, in the decade between 2010 and 2020, Nigeria's GDP grew by 23%, while the national population went up by 17%. The relative gains in GDP, however seem only illusory when compared with a 54% increase in out-of-school children and the gallop of 88% increment in Almajiri population. The Almajiri population is advancing at fourfold the national GDP.

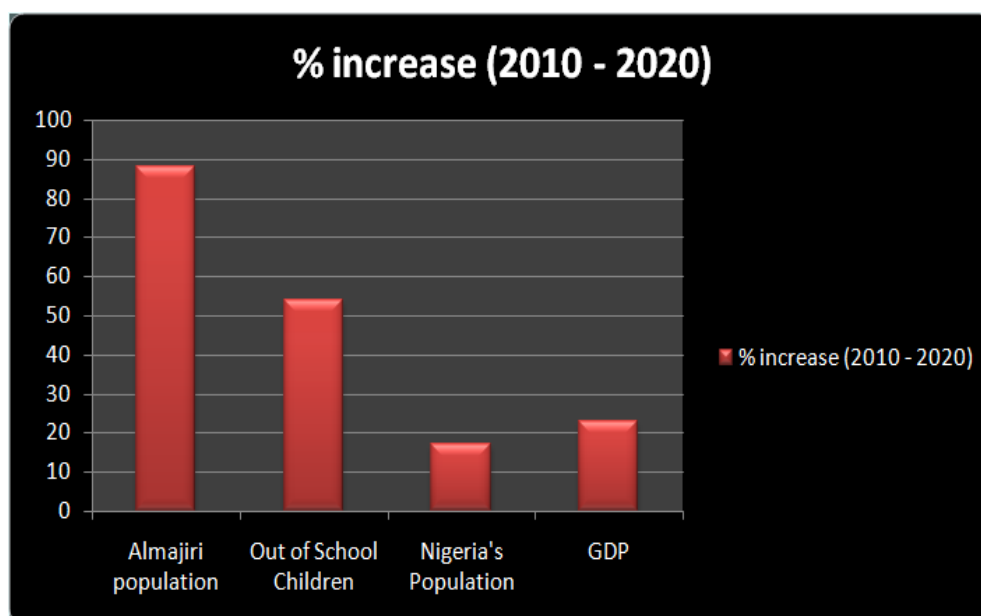


Figure 2: Decennial percentile increase in population and GDP

In fact, Figs. 3a and b show that, decennial percentiles compared, the Alimajiri has bitten more of the out-of-school pie in 2020 (72%) than in 2010 (65%). Except conciliatory interventions are made, this trend may continue unfettered with scary criminal and health consequences.

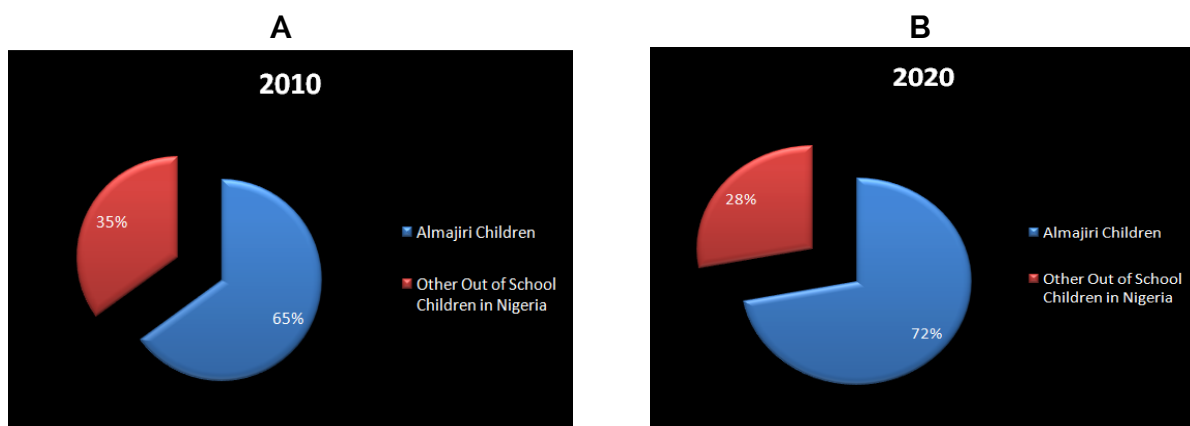


Figure 3a &b: The Almajiri biting more and more of the out of school pie

Little wonder the rise in insurgency

The saying is true that relatives who are indifferent to the aberrant tendencies of one of theirs would bear the brunt of the consequences to come. There has been a direct proportionality between the steady rise in Almajiri population and insurgency in Nigeria. Their discontentment with western education is a ready requisite for recruitment into Boko Haram. Indeed, that expression of disdain for western education had been etched in the subconscious of the successive generations of Almajiri since the withdrawal of funding by the British. Given their discontentment with western education, their wandering potentials are deployed in insurgency. With little incentives, the Almajiri are recruited and radicalised in large numbers.

Little wonder then, that the child-perpetrators of suicide bombings have been linked to the Almajiri. There is a gender role in this as female Almajira have been favourites for the bombings. Such that while the males rise in the cadre of insurgency the females are wasted in suicide bombings. As Adamu (2019) claims, the current head of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau is an Almajiri alumnus:

An example close to home is that of Abubakar Shekau of the deadly Boko Haram sect. Shekau grew up an Almajiri, migrating from his village to Maiduguri, where he would meet Mohammad Yusuf, the founder of the Boko Haram sect. Shekau would later become the group's leader. He does not represent Almajiri boys or the Almajiri system, but he will always be remembered as the Almajiri who became a terrorist.

Adamu (2020)

Almajiri and COVID-19

The recent cascading of COVID-19 infections in northern Nigeria proves the point that contagion is commensurate with poverty. No sooner than the Coronavirus touched Kano did it spread like an inferno. Expectedly, the fuelling was supplied by the Almajiri. *ThisDay* (2020) reported that 50 out of 59 COVID-19 cases in Kaduna State were traced to returnee Almajiri from Kano as at 6 May 2020. Again, 16 of 45 Almajiri samples tested in Jigawa State returned positive with Coronavirus (Ozo, 2020). The BBC (2020) figures were 91 of 168 for Jigawa, and 65 of 169 in Kaduna. Indeed the morbidity dynamics of COVID-19 lends credence to the disease agency of the Almajiri.



Figure 4: Almajiri being tested for COVID-19 in Jigawa State (Culled from BBC New)

Fig. 5 portrays the rate of spread of COVID-19 versus levels of poverty across the states of Nigeria as at 29 May 2020. The rate is calculated by dividing the total number of cases by the number of days since the index case in each state. The values computed for rate were sourced from the Nigeria Centre for Disease control (NCDC, 2020) and those for poverty intensity are from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020).

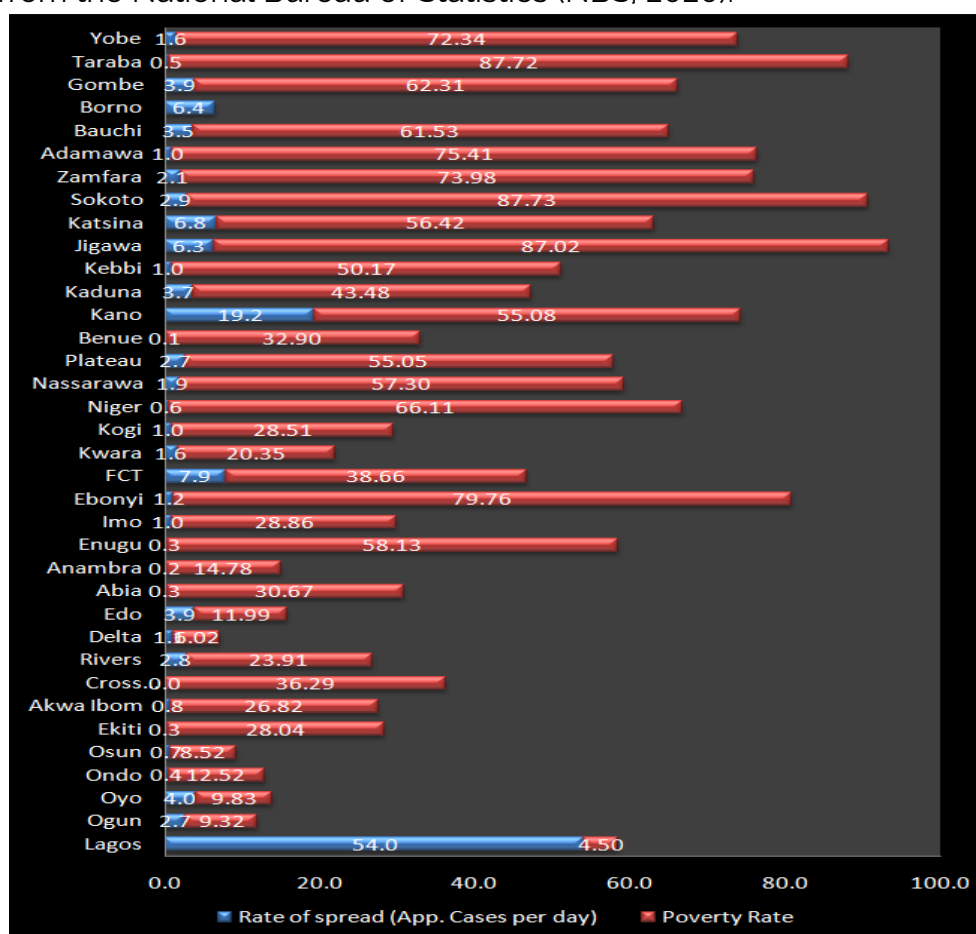


Figure 5: Rate of spread of COVID-19 alongside poverty across the states of Nigeria.

The incidence rate of COVID-19 in Lagos (54) is in dissonance with its low level of poverty (4.5). This is largely because, being the financial capital of Nigeria, it has the highest population density and was the portal of entry of infections. For these reasons Lagos State qualifies as an outlier, whose values do not reflect the norm. Similar considerations as for Lagos could be ascribed to FCT Abuja with an infection rate of 7.9, which is still dwarfed by Kano (19.2). The high incidence rate in Kano is not merely fortuitous; rather it could be linked to the fact that Kano has the highest number of Almajiri (Adewale, 2018). Jigawa (6.3), Katsina (6.8) and Borno (6.4) states are also prominent. Indeed, a clearer picture of the disproportional rate can be gleaned from the perspective of Nigeria's six geo-political zones (Fig. 6).

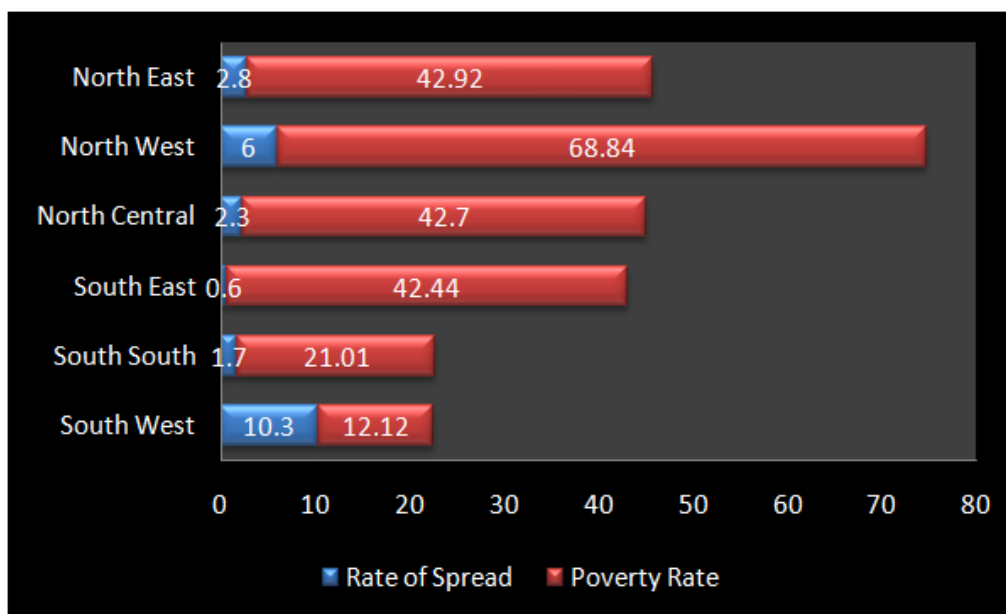


Figure 6: Rate of spread of COVID-19 alongside poverty across Geo-political Zones.

In Fig. 6, the South West average is discountenanced because of the Lagos outlier effect. This leaves the three highest rates in the three zones in northern Nigeria; again, propelled by the disease agency of the Almajiri. There is no better illustration of the strong affinity between disease (COVID-19) and poverty (the Almajiri). This pattern has prompted governors in the northern states to repatriate non-indigenous Almajiri to their respective states of origin.

Why did previous efforts to rehabilitate the Almajiri fail?

There has not been a dearth of efforts to end the Almajiri quandary. For instance, a National Framework for the Almajiri was incorporated into the Nigeria Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 2010. The charge was to develop and integrate the Almajiri System. In its discharge of the mandate, the UBE expended \$98 million to build 124 Almajiri Model Schools across 26 states of the Federation (Fig. 7). This has proved a white elephant project as the schools have hardly been utilised and some of them have been deployed to uses other the education of the Almajiri (Omeni, 2015). Hence, like its 1989 predecessor, National Commission for Nomadic Education, the 2010 Almajiri/UBE project nosedived no sooner than it started. There was again a grandiose plan in 2013 to integrate the Almajiri into the

formal education system via a National Committee on the implementation of Almajiri Education. That too is yet to materialise.



Figure 7a & b: An abandoned Almajiri Model School in Jigawa State (Temitope Kalejaye, 2015)

Thus far, the Almajiri quandary has proved intractable, largely because remedial efforts have been inadvertently founded on inequality. That is on the false premise that Islamic education is inferior to western education, and that the one had to be absorbed by the other. Be that as it may, there are two reasons for the abysmal failure of previous interventions. The first is the lack of inclusiveness; the second, an erroneous emphasis on changing their educational system rather than discharging the Almajiri from abject poverty

It is absurd how the stage is set for yet a repeat of history. Left to the governors of Kano and Kaduna states, the solution is to abolish the Almajiri schools and herd their students into secular schools. Unfortunately, things are not so cut and dried. Likely, with the abolishment of the Almajiri system, their schools will disappear but the child beggars would remain. Clearly, the disease agency of the Almajiri has pulled the wool off the faces of the northern leaders, yet caution must be courted, as brash reactions such as the criminalisation of the Almajiri System may further harm rather than arm the victim children. If Almajiri privations are not addressed, absorbing them into the secular education system will be just as effective as storing water in a basket. The children will only attend school if their impoverished state is elevated. The Almajiri System may not submit to the armoury of executive orders. It must be understood that it is a way of life arguably rooted in religious belief; and history has shown that infringing on religion often invites rebellion.

Concerning inclusiveness, it is paramount to note that student Almajiri cannot be rehabilitated without factoring in their Mallams and parents, northern elites and the very Almajiri to be rescued. These key players have hitherto been spectators in the rehabilitation plans for the Almajiri. Liked or loathed, the Mallams have the ears of the Almajiri, who would do as the Mallams instruct. Hence, it is crucial for the Mallams to be enlisted in whatever street-exit plan that will work for the Almajiri. The parents too must buy into a plan to properly domesticate the Almajiri. Without reckoning with these custodians of the children, any intervention will remain mere will-o-the-wisp. Certainly, the fail-safe measure would be to valorise the work of the Mallams and incentivize the parents. In addition, previous

attempts to revise the Almajiri System have missed out on enlisting the support of the northern elite and religious cum traditional leaders. It would go a long way if Sultans, Emirs and prominent and respected northerners lend unalloyed voices to the rehabilitation plan. In like manner, the voices of the Almajiri must also be heard before their real needs and preferences can be determined.

The notion is as clear as noonday that poverty is the basis for the alms-begging. Hence, the vagrant status may only be rested when their subsistence is guaranteed. There ought to be a consistent welfare package if the Almajiri must stay in school. Thus far, interventions have come as one-off plans with staggering amounts spent on infrastructure and propaganda, whereas there are no living incentives for the Almajiri. It is a simple rule of economy of scale to invest money in developing humans rather than spend even more in a perennial war against insurgency. Undeniably, an Almajiri derailment which stemmed from the British government's withdrawal of funds may only bounce back with the consistent injection of same.

An All-Inclusive Alliance

If there is one thing to be done differently in getting the Almajiri out of the street, it is that all stakeholders should be engaged as equals in negotiating a way forward. The era of readymade solutions from governments has expired. There ought to be a conciliatory engagement leading to consensus decisions with requisite sense of equality, inclusiveness and financial empowerment. To this end, the following suggestions are made bearing in mind the previous progress and pitfalls.

- 1. An Almajiri Stakeholders Summit in collaboration with the Nigerian Governors Forum (NGF)**

This will address the issues of equality and inclusiveness. It will involve all stakeholders: the Almajiri, the Mallams, parents, governors, the northern elite, religious and traditional leaders, the ministries of Education and Finance etc.

The call for the summit is based on the flaws of the past whereby decisions were implemented without consultation with key players.

- 2. Adoption and Adaptation of the Arab Model of Islamic cum Western Education**

For Almajiri students and practitioners to buy into an upgrade and coalescence with the secular curriculum, it is imperative for both systems to be perceived as equal. To this end, the Arab model could be understudied and customised to suit Nigerian needs. In particular the models in the United Arab Emirate and Saudi Arabia blend Islamic and western education quite equally. Their graduates compare well with those of the West.

- 3. Universal Basic Income (UBI) targeted at parents**

The primary motive for sending children to boarding Almajiri schools is to pass up the cost of their upkeep. By so doing, the Almajiri get no parental care at all. In the revamped system it would be better for the Almajiri to attend school from home. This may only be possible under a UBI scheme which offers additional stipend to



biological parent per child, for up to four children. This arrangement will come with the additional benefit of getting parents involved in the schooling of their wards.

4. Comprehensive School Feeding Programme

An additional incentive for children from poor homes to attend school is good quality school feeding. This is true in China as it is in the USA. The current School feeding program has to be rejigged and expanded for improved quality and nutritional benefits. That this may operate effectively, there needs to be a thorough monitoring of the school feeding programme.

5. Valorization of Mallams

Mallams are stigmatised and blamed by many for the misfortune of the Almajiri. This is an unfair sentence, largely because Mallams set out from the start to pass on noble Islamic values. It is no fault of theirs that funds were withdrawn. In fact, it is nobler still for them to take on the complete responsibility of parents.

Mallams will cash into the Almajiri upgrade if there is equally some upgrade for them in terms of being absorbed into a proper salary structure that places them at par with other teachers.

6. Establishment of a Street Child/Almajiri Directorate which reports directly to the Presidency.

Considering the exigency, the fact that Nigeria tops the world chart of street children, a dedicated directorate should be set up to report directly to the presidency on matters of street child rehabilitation.

7. Funding options

We propose a Primary and Secondary Education Trust Fund (PsETFund) for which there will be several streams of income: 2% tax from the organised private sector; as well as subventions from state and federal governments.

Nigerians in the Diaspora should also be encouraged to do a weekly one dollar check-off to PsETFUND. Note: the percentage of PsETFUND to go to street children and the Almajiri will be determined from a feasibility study of projected income and needs.

Conclusion

The Almajiri debacle calls for concerted effort towards a radical response. There is a dire need for government to attend the situation with committed political will. To avoid the slips of the past, we must adopt consensus solutions, formulated in equality and inclusiveness. The benefits to accrue go well beyond the refinement it will bestow on the wandering street child. It will just as well immunise the nation from self-inflicted disease and terrorism. Nigeria might yet escape from the paradoxical trap of poverty in abundance.



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