

## Rabbit Farming: A Means of Mitigating Almajiri System in Northern Nigeria – A Review

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### Abstract

This paper explores the viability of using rabbit farming to address the challenges posed by the *Almajiri* system in northern Nigeria. The *Almajiri* system, characterized by sending underprivileged children to Quranic schools without adequate care or education, has resulted in various pressing societal issues. This study suggested that integrating rabbit farming into *Almajiri* educational curricula will equipped the children with valuable skills and knowledge and effectively bridge the educational gap experienced by *Almajirai* (plural). Additionally, rabbit farming offers a sustainable income source, thus reducing reliance on the *Almajiri* system and empowering marginalized communities economically. Furthermore, rabbit meat's nutritional benefits can contribute to improved nutritional security in affected regions. Besides economic and educational aspects, rabbit farming fosters social integration, cooperation, and empowerment among community members. To fully harness the potential of rabbit farming, collaborative efforts from government agencies, non-profit organizations, and local communities are essential. By investing in rabbit farming as an alternative livelihoods, Nigeria can create a more inclusive and prosperous society while mitigating the challenges posed by the *Almajiri* system.

**Key words:** Challenges; Almajiri; mitigation; Education; Rabbit farming

### Introduction

Northern Nigeria comprises three geo-political zones: the Northeast, North-Central, and Northwest, encompassing 19 states known for their underdevelopment (Morgan, 2008). The region's backwardness is closely associated with persistent poverty, with the North-East suffering the most (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019; Presidential Initiative on North-East, 2019). Agriculture forms the backbone of Northern Nigeria's economy; however, its reliance on traditional methods and manual labor hinders its potential to uplift the region's socioeconomic status (Salihi, 2012).

The predominant ethnic group in Northern Nigeria is the Hausa-Fulani, the majority of whom Muslims, thus making Islam the dominant religion alongside Christianity and traditional beliefs. While there are various minor ethnic groups present, the cultural and linguistic influence of the Hausa-Fulani remains prominent (Muzan, 2014; Peter and Ian, 1984). The *Almajiri* system, deeply entrenched in Northern Nigeria, reflects the complex interplay between religion and poverty (Sani, 2011). Originally intended to groom future Islamic teachers (Powell and Abraham, 2019), the *Almajiri* system has evolved due to the

arrival of Western education and the changing socio-political landscape, leading to its exploitation by elites and fundamentalists (Roger, 2018). This exploitation has given rise to societal malaises, leaving the children of the poor and ill-informed parents vulnerable to various challenges, including involvement in criminal activities and substance abuse (Sidi, 2015; Umaru, 2015).

To address the pressing issue of the *Almajiri* system and its consequences, exploring alternative livelihood opportunities becomes imperative. Among these, rabbit farming, a sustainable and profitable aspect of agriculture, holds significant potential (Lukefahr *et al.*, 2022; Bello *et al.*, 2020). Rabbits are resilient animals with short gestation periods, capable of thriving in diverse environments, and offer opportunities for employment, income generation, and enhanced food security (Mpundu and Bopape, 2022).

By focusing on rabbit farming, this paper aims to review the current *Almajiri* system in Northern Nigeria and propose it as a means of mitigating the problems arising from abuse and neglect faced by *Almajiri* children. Through this review, the paper intends to shed light on the practicality of adopting rabbit farming as a strategy to empower *Almajirai* children, providing them with sustainable livelihoods, educational prospects, and a path away from social challenges. By understanding the potential benefits of rabbit farming and its impact on the *Almajiri* system, stakeholders can work toward implementing effective and holistic solutions to address the root causes of poverty and deprivation in the region. Additionally, this paper will recognize potential limitations in the proposed approach, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for mitigating the *Almajiri* system in Northern Nigeria.

### **Concept of *Almajiri* System in Northern Nigeria**

The *Almajiri* system is a prevalent practice in northern Nigeria, which involves sending of young children to Quranic schools for religious education (Lawson, 2021). Over the years, this system has faced criticism due to the lack of adequate care, social integration, and educational opportunities provided to these children (Powell and Abraham, 2019). Consequently, it has been associated with several societal challenges, including poverty, illiteracy, child labor, and an increased risk of radicalization (Umaru, 2015).

To fully understand the *Almajiri* system, it is essential to explore its historical and cultural roots. Historically, the system served as an important means of transmitting Islamic knowledge and values in the region. It represented a strong cultural tradition that promoted religious education, moral upbringing, and community cohesion (Magashi, 2013). However, societal changes, economic challenges, and inadequate governance have contributed to the system's transformation and challenges it faces today (Hansen *et al.*, 2016).

The *Almajiri* system in Northern Nigeria faces multiple challenges, including poverty, lack of access to quality education, child exploitation, health issues, social stigma, and limited future opportunities (Imoudu, 2020). To improve the well-being and future prospects of these children, a comprehensive approach is needed. This includes support from government, NGOs, communities, and religious leaders. Potential interventions through comprehensive education reform, poverty alleviation programs, healthcare initiatives and community sensitization should also be considered. Northern Nigeria can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for *Almajirai*, provide them with better opportunities for a brighter future by addressing the above issues and implementing the identified solutions.

Numerous studies have highlighted the negative socioeconomic impact of the *Almajiri* system (Lawson, 2021; Abdullahi, 2018; Shittu and Olaofe, 2015; Wara, 2015; Aghedo, 2013). The lack of comprehensive education and vocational training often leaves *Almajirai* unprepared to enter the modern workforce, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Furthermore, this vulnerable group is prone to exploitation and child labor, which is a widespread issue in sub-Saharan Africa (Julie, 2018; Magashi, 2013).

### ***Almajiri* Welfare and Child Abuse:**

One of the major criticisms of the *Almajiri* system is the neglect and abuse experienced by these children. Most of the *Almajirai* are abandoned by their parents and left to fend for themselves on the streets, resorting to begging for survival (Wara, 2015; Magashi, 2015; Aghedo and Eke, 2013). This exposure to street life

puts them at risk of various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation (Abdullahi and Bakabe, 2020; Kawugana and Faruna, 2018). Some scholars have raised concerns about the potential link between the *Almajiri* system and an increased risk of radicalization (Sarkingobir *et al.*, 2019; Hansen *et al.*, 2016). The lack of adequate supervision and guidance, combined with exposure to extremist ideologies, could make certain *Almajirai* susceptible to recruitment by terrorist groups.

While acknowledging the challenges, it is crucial to consider potential pathways to reform the *Almajiri* system. Policymakers and stakeholders need to collaborate to address the systemic issues that perpetuate its shortcomings. Some possible strategies include: comprehensive education, vocational training, family and community support, regulation and oversight.

It is clear from the above discussion that the *Almajiri* system in northern Nigeria presents complex challenges that demand thoughtful analysis and comprehensive solutions. By acknowledging its historical significance while addressing the contemporary issues it faces, there is an opportunity to transform the system into a more inclusive, supportive, and effective form of religious education, better serving the needs and future of the *Almajirai* and the broader Nigerian society.

### **Rabbit Farming for Economic Empowerment**

The rapid population growth, urbanization, and high youth unemployment rates in Nigeria have created significant socio-economic challenges, with over 10 million children out of school, whose majority belong to the *Almajiri* system in the northern region (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2021). Rabbit farming as a means of promoting economic empowerment and skill acquisition for the *Almajiri* community, is considered a novel approach to address these challenges.

Rabbit farming presents numerous advantages that positioned it as an excellent source of animal protein. Rabbits exhibit fast growth rates, have a short gestation interval, attain early sexual maturity, and efficiently convert forages and low-quality feed into high-quality meat (Bello *et al.*, 2020). Unlike other conventional meat sources, rabbit meat is rich in high-quality protein, low in calories, cholesterol, and fats. Its high vitamin B content and low sodium levels make it a life-saving protein source for individuals with diabetes, hypertension, and malnourished children (Iheukwumere *et al.*, 2018).

The ever-widening gap between demand and supply of animal protein in Nigeria presents lucrative opportunities in the livestock industry. Rabbit farming, with its minimal space and resource requirements, offers a profitable and economically feasible venture (Padmanabha, 2018). Rabbits can be raised in remote areas, reaching marketable weight (1.5-2.5 kg) in 8-12 weeks, making them a viable option for small-scale farming (Bello *et al.*, 2020).

Introducing rabbit farming as a skill acquisition program could lead to tangible improvements in the *Almajiri* system, and incorporating rabbit farming into the curriculum of *Almajiri* child could develop valuable agricultural and entrepreneurial skills. Moreover, engaging in rabbit farming would provide an alternative livelihood for the *Almajiri*, potentially reducing the risks of neglect and child abuse they often face. However, while promoting rabbit farming, it is crucial to address potential socio-cultural factors that might impact its acceptance within the *Almajiri* community. Sensitivity to cultural beliefs and practices, as well as involving community leaders and stakeholders in the implementation process, will enhance the success and sustainability of this initiative.

Rabbit farming should be integrated into a broader economic empowerment strategy that encompasses diversified income-generating activities and vocational training. This comprehensive approach will ensure a more sustainable and holistic upliftment of the *Almajiri* community and instructors alike. In recognition of potential challenges in implementing rabbit farming as an economic empowerment strategy, further research on market access, technical training, and the development of supportive policies are encouraged. Lessons learned from successful pilot projects could guide the scaling up of this intervention to benefit a larger number of *Almajiri* children and their communities.

Rabbit farming presents a promising opportunity for economic empowerment and skill development within the *Almajiri* community. By leveraging the unique benefits of rabbit farming, this initiative can contribute to mitigating the challenges faced by the *Almajiri* system in Northern Nigeria, providing a pathway towards a more sustainable and inclusive future.

### **Education and Skill Development**

Education and skills development are vital for any society's progress, shaping individuals and nations into knowledgeable and self-reliant entities (Sowjanya and Hans, 2019). The *Almajiri* system in Northern Nigeria has brought attention to the need for comprehensive solutions to empower neglected children and youths. In this paper, we propose the integration of rabbit farming into Quranic school curricula to address the *Almajiri* system's challenges effectively. Education not only fosters national development but also empowers individuals to actively participate in the development process (Sowjanya and Hans, 2015). Skill training plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality, economic prosperity, and social well-being (Sowjanya and Hans, 2019). As a responsible nation, Nigeria should focus on educating its children and youth, ensuring that education becomes an essential right for everyone (Sharma and Mishra, 2019).

Designing a comprehensive *Almajiri* education curriculum involves balancing religious teachings with essential secular education (Idris, 2016). An example curriculum includes Quranic studies, Islamic studies, Arabic language and secular education in math, English, and science, vocational training, cultural studies, physical education, and character development. This curriculum should aim at equipping *Almajirai* with knowledge and skills for personal and socio-economic development. Policymakers and educators can customize and expand this framework to meet local needs, fostering inclusive and holistic education for *Almajirai*.

The *Almajiri* system has faced challenges, including political barriers to previous attempts to establish *Almajiri* schools (Abua, 2021; Taiwo, 2014). To address this issue, harnessing the potential of *Almajirai* in the livestock industry, particularly through rabbit farming will be a good approach. Rabbit farming offers a range of entrepreneurial skills, such as livestock management, production, sales, and repairs, as well as feed processing using locally available materials (Mpundu and Bopape, 2022).

The difficulties faced by *Almajiri* education system in Nigeria due to inadequate infrastructures for teaching and learning process could be attributed to the underprivileged backgrounds of *Almajirai* (Idris, 2016). The absence of proper classrooms, libraries, and learning materials has hindered the students' academic development and access to quality education. However, the efforts government and NGOs through different initiatives such as the Basic Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA), National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies (NBAIS) and education for all (EFA) and Islamic world Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO, formerly, ISESCO), which aims to enhance access to basic education, including *Almajiri* child, by constructing schools, teacher training, and the provision of learning materials have improved the system (Idris, 2016). Despite all efforts, *Almajiri* child is still left as a street beggar and alleged with the menace of social vices (Edinyang, *et al.*, 2020).

To improve the *Almajiri* education system in Nigeria, it is essential to address poor professionalism within the government and Ministry of Education. The evaluation of teachers should focus on key gaps, including their qualifications and training, commitment to *Almajiri* education, professional conduct and ethics, innovative teaching approaches, assessment and monitoring of student progress, teacher support and professional development, and community engagement. By addressing these areas, the government can promote professionalism among teachers, leading to improved educational outcomes and the overall development of *Almajiri* students.

Integrating rabbit farming into the Quranic school curriculum could provide practical and marketable skills to *Almajirai*. Since rabbits have small space requirement, a cubicle of 100 x 100cm, constructed using locally available materials (waste woods nails and roofing sheets etc.) can accommodate four rabbits (a male and three females) which can thrive well on forage and available kitchen wastes. Complementing this with practical lessons on animal husbandry, entrepreneurship, and agricultural techniques, will enhance

their employability prospects and self-reliance. Moreover, integrating literacy and skill education alongside rabbit farming will bridge the educational gap often experienced by *Almajirai*, adding value to the *Almajiri* system and ensuring food security. To ensure the long-term impact of this approach, it is essential to address the socioeconomic context surrounding the *Almajiri* system. Considering available resources, infrastructure, and cultural aspects will be crucial in designing effective programs. Moreover, the ethical implications of involving children and youths in vocational training must be carefully examined, with measures in place to protect their rights and well-being.

Integrating rabbit farming into Quranic schools offers a promising pathway to empower *Almajirai* in Northern Nigeria. By providing practical skills and knowledge, this approach can create livelihood opportunities and enhance the economic and social well-being of neglected children and youths. To achieve sustainable change, we encourage policymakers, educators, and communities to collaborate in implementing this holistic approach and transform the *Almajiri* system for the betterment of future generations.

### **Rabbit Farming for Food Security:**

The adoption of rabbit farming presents a promising opportunity to address nutritional security among the *Almajirai* Northern Nigeria. Rabbit meat is a rich source of protein, essential vitamins, and minerals, making it a valuable dietary supplement for communities facing nutritional deficiencies (FAO, 2022). Numerous studies have shown that incorporating rabbit meat into the diet can improve overall nutrition and combat malnutrition effectively (Bello *et al.*, 2020; Jabbar *et al.*, 2014; Aduku and Olukosi, 1990). To ensure the success of rabbit farming for nutritional security, it is essential to provide training and support to the *Almajirai* on rabbit husbandry and management practices. Community workshops and demonstrations can be organized to disseminate knowledge and best practices in raising rabbits. Additionally, partnerships with local agricultural institutions and NGOs can offer technical expertise and access to resources such as improved breeds and feed. However, it is essential to consider potential challenges, such as limited access to capital for initial investments and the cultural acceptability of rabbit meat within the affected communities. To overcome these obstacles, stakeholders must be engaged in sensitization campaigns to promote the nutritional benefits of rabbit meat and its integration into local cuisines.

### **Social Integration and Empowerment**

Rabbit farming has the potential to foster social integration and empowerment within the *Almajiri* community. Through engaging in a collective and income-generating activity such as rabbit farming, the *Almajirai* child can experience a sense of belonging and cooperation, leading to increased social cohesion. To encourage social integration, community-based rabbit farming cooperatives can be established, this will unit individuals to work together, share responsibilities, and pool resources. These cooperatives not only promote a supportive environment but also create opportunities for skill development, mutualism, leadership, and decision-making among the participants. Furthermore, the empowerment of *Almajirai* through rabbit farming could be enhanced by providing them with ownership and responsibility over the process. Empowerment workshops and training sessions can be organized to build their capacity in entrepreneurship, financial management, and marketing. However, cultural norms and traditions might pose challenges to social integration and empowerment efforts. Therefore, inclusive and participatory approaches that respect local customs should be adopted as a means of addressing the issues. Involving community leaders and influencers in the process could facilitate acceptance and support for such initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, rabbit farming shows great promise as a means of mitigating the *Almajiri* system's challenges in Northern Nigeria. By addressing issues of nutritional security, social integration, and empowerment, rabbit farming can positively impact the lives of *Almajirai* child. The nutritional benefits of rabbit meat offer a sustainable solution to combat malnutrition and improve overall health in the affected communities. Simultaneously, the collective nature of rabbit farming can promote social cohesion and empowers

individuals to take charge of their economic future. However, the successful implementation of rabbit farming programs relies on addressing potential barriers, including financial constraints and cultural acceptance. By adopting inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches, stakeholders can overcome these challenges and realize the full potential of rabbit farming as a transformative strategy.

### Recommendations

Based on this review, the following recommendations are proposed to effectively utilize rabbit farming as a means of mitigating the *Almajiri* system in Northern Nigeria:

- a. Establish Training Programs: Develop comprehensive training programs on rabbit husbandry, management, and entrepreneurship for the *Almajirai* child at their study centers. These programs should be designed to empower participants with the knowledge and skills necessary for successful rabbit farming.
- b. Form Community-Based Cooperatives: Encourage the formation of community-based rabbit farming cooperatives to foster social integration, collective decision-making, and resource-sharing among the participants.
- c. Sensitization Campaigns: government and stake holders should conduct sensitization campaigns to raise awareness about the role of rabbit farming as a means of wealth creation in addition to source of food and promote its cultural acceptability within the community.
- d. Collaboration with NGOs and Agricultural Institutions: Forge partnerships with relevant organizations and institutions to access technical expertise, funding, and resources for sustainable rabbit farming initiatives.
- e. Monitor and Evaluate: Implement a robust monitoring and evaluation system to assess the impact of rabbit farming projects on nutritional security, social integration, and empowerment. Use the data gathered to make informed adjustments and improvements.
- f. Infrastructural development: There is need to prioritize investment in infrastructural development, focusing on building and improving educational facilities like schools and learning centers. Emphasis should also be made on access to learning materials, providing teacher training and support, engage local communities and religious leaders, foster government and NGO collaborations, implement curricular reforms and establish a robust monitoring and evaluation system. These measures will enhance the educational system of *Almajirai* and empower them with better learning opportunities and improve their socio-economic prospects.

By adhering to these recommendations, stakeholders can effectively harness the potential of rabbit farming as a transformative tool to alleviate the challenges posed by the *Almajiri* system in Northern Nigeria.

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