

CHILD STREET-BEGGING AS A SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE: THE MEDIA PANACEA

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ABSTRACT

Street-begging in Nigeria has been a social malaise for decades with its attendant socio-economic, environmental and political implications and ramifications. Fundamental to the issue of the causative and detrimental factors is the level of poverty, uneven distribution of wealth and inadequate opportunities within the of society, especially in Nigeria. This paper examined the degeneration of the social and economic base of the Nigerian society to the level on impecuniousness and impoverishment, which some scholars believe in self-inflicted. The Afro-centric scholars in the past have always traced the economic doldrums Africa and Nigeria found itself from the 19th century pillaging of her resources by colonial masters and the industrialized world. This paper interrogated this assertion further and examined factors responsible for this malady fifty years after the departure of the colonialist. The role of both the conventional mass media and indigenous traditional media is explored in this paper and the ineffectual nature of its impact on the advocacy and behaviour change process. Despite the huge nature and influence of radio, television, billboards and instructional educational materials, there doesn't seem to be a reduction in the increase of teenage child-beggars on the streets especially in the northern parts of the country. The essential overriding sociological factors of culture, religion and tradition also formed a basis of interrogation using socio-cognitive theory as framework. This allowed an analysis based on elements of human culture and relationships to a larger societal unit, as well as the prolonged effect of the dependency syndrome entrenched in developing countries by the Western World. This study determined that solutions are situated in good governance, entrepreneurship, quality education and effective use of both mass media and oral traditional media.

Keywords: Child street-begging, Dependency syndrome, Mass Media and Oral Media

Introduction

The social malfeasance of street-begging along with its origin and implication on national development in developing countries has remained a major challenge for decades. Street-begging can be classified as a dysfunctional by-product of economic conditions of poverty, corruption, maladministration as well as socio-political indicators of absence or neglect of welfarism and social security safety nets.

Whatever perspectives, are interrogated, the discursive trajectory presents the causative and resultant effects of street begging as a significant reflection of underdevelopment and inability of a society to plan and provide for its underprivileged young and old. Suffice to say that these maladies like poor housing, poor education, inadequate healthcare as well as high infant and maternal mortality are all symptomatic of underdevelopment, especially with Third World countries of Asia, Africa and some parts of Latin America. However Harrison (1979) espouses that if “an analysis of Third World development were to go back in history, it would be seen that countries such as India, China, Egypt and Peru were centres of sophisticated civilization as far back as 2000 BC “ (Melkote 1991:104). Indeed the correlation between poverty and underdevelopment is further exposed as a direct consequence of the rise of industrialization of the western nations, as argued by Frank (1969)

Underdevelopment is not due to the survival of archaic institutions and existence of capital shortage in regions that have remained isolated from the streams of world history. On the contrary, underdevelopment was and is still generated by the very same historical process which also generated economic development: The development

of capitalism itself. (Frank 1969:9).

Melkote however disagrees that this theory essentially remains responsible for underdevelopment, as he highlights the dysfunction between core and peripheral economic regional policies which vary from country to country and society to society. Exponents of the sociology of development model posit that “underdevelopment of countries in Asia and Africa was not by choice”, that due to their colonized status they have been forced to either de-industrialize or remain in a state of underdevelopment. Where they were deemed to be desirous of such economic emancipation, the forces of industrialization ensured that the “dependency” syndrome provided for lack of education and instructional capacity in science and technology that would result in independence and economic emancipation.

The foregoing situate the poverty status created and engendered by numerous forces mentioned earlier like poor education policy and structure, poor economic policies and inadequate infrastructure. Therefore the Gross Domestic Product remains low, while the unemployment rate, the inflation figures, infant and maternal mortality all remain very high. This environment of social and infrastructural decay presents a low quality of life, poor sanitation absence of quality healthcare and very ridiculous per capital income per head. Statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics show that more than 10million children under 10years remain out of school in Nigeria. This is indicative of the level of poverty and underdevelopment. Suffice it to say that these out of school children are victims of so many intervening variables as factors. It is also believed that 7milliion adult Nigerians are unemployed which indicates that according to the National Bureau of

Statistics 2016 about 35million people are poverty stricken if you consider that each of the 7million people have an average of 5 dependants.

A cursory examination of the economic challenge of child street begging shows that the absence of skills as a results of economic hardship and inability of the family to provide for school fees, uniforms, feeding while at school, as well as transport fare to and from such schools which might not be within the vicinity all become reasons for street begging. In other cases, refusal to attend school is deliberate and is sometimes dictated by some community based individuals or groups who dogmatically preach that western education is not desirable because it carries along with it a baggage of Christianity as a symbiotic appendage and tool for indoctrination into the "white man's religion". Within the southern parts of the country, children have also been denied education and skills because hawking and menial jobs are needed to augment the family income. In other cases as in the North East of Nigeria, such demagogues have stigmatized western education as "not useful" and as such forbidden "because the education the British handed down to use does not provide jobs!! Not withstanding the fact that the absence of white collar jobs could be more of a result of poor economic policies and national planning deficiency rather than the type of educational policy. Some religious bigots preach about the need to give priority to the education that "will guarantee you heaven and paradise" rather than the one that will certify you a job with a school or college certificate. This ploy and utilization of the religious and cultural card is very predominant in the northern part of the country as religious clerics are more influential than household heads.

Successive government in the country have essentially targeted reduction of out-of-school children with support of the United Nation

Children and Educational Fund (UNICEF) and other international donors, but the daily returns from the street-children to their benefactors has remained a major challenge. Street children remain an eyesore that renders them vulnerable to use of drugs, subjects them to peer group pressure to join or form street gangs and in some cases become cannon-fodder for politicians that use them for incidences of thuggery and political imbroglio during electioneering campaigns by offering them cheap money. They constitute nuisances which include open defecation, littering the streets and sometimes petty stealing. Based on the economic and socio political structure inherited from the past colonial governments, it is obvious that the framework and structure of government and governance had been structurally defined in such a way that the theory applicable to this relationships between the government, society and the individual can only be theorized through structuralism because of the compartmentalization of society and its processes. It is therefore not unusual to see why the economic policies of government impacts on the society, the individual and his well-being and fortunes. Where the system is centered on high capitalist tendencies, the gap between the rich and the poor tends to widen periodically as it is with Nigeria.

They face sordid conditions of living and become an economic burden to society as well, despite all efforts by government to provide primary school feeding, free education and in some states free uniforms and books. According to the National Bureau of Statistics out of a population of 70 million Nigerians, 10 million are street children and will certainly reduce the quality of manpower available to its workforce and intelligentsia in future.

Therefore, while efforts by government at taking child-beggars off the street have been commendable, it is still half-hearted and

rather tepid and has not given enough attention to oral media.

Statement of problem

While poverty remains the primary reason, there exist other tangential reasons like absence of skills, cultural factors religious directive from their “tsangaya” teachers and as in the case in southern Nigeria, hawking. It would seem that despite the expenditure of N15Billion by the Federal Government in 2009 on the construction of Almajiri Model Schools all over the country especially in the northern states, not much progress has been made in reducing the menace of child street-beggars. Despite the massive interest by International Donor Agencies as well as the desire by governors of the northern states, not enough success has been recorded either. The aim of this study is to interrogate the factors militating against the evacuation and resettlement of the street beggars, and how the media can facilitate and engender the galvanization of social forces for the achievement of this objective.

Theoretical Framework

Utilizing the social cognitive theory, it is presumed that this phenomenon can be analyzed and deconstructed through the cognition process which most of the street children can be persuaded to pursue and go through in order to change their worldview and perception of the their existence, its meaning and how their individual and collective existence affects all other humans. Within this process, cognition helps them imbibe certain new values, norms and realities attached to both their culture and religion and how lack of knowledge of these further entrenches them in the quagmire of hopelessness and indefinite anomie.

Social cognitive theory is the perspective which posits that people learn by watching others. It explains how the environment

fashions the perception of man and how also he influences his environment. This theory propounded by Albert Bandura in the 1960s argues that when someone sees his people, his peers or other members of society get rewarded for something or an action he took, he tends to behave the same way to attain an award as well. The personality of a person is affected including the way he thinks and perceives himself in relation to others both by the environment and by the actions of his counterparts. The social cognitive theory is theoretical perspective whereby learning by observing others is the fulcrum on which the theory is based, learners can acquire new behaviour and knowledge by simply observing others. Children in these parts of the country learn from their parents and other members of society right from infancy. The long standing tradition of the Quranic schools letting their children or students go out to beg has its roots in steep history of the last five centuries in Hausaland and indeed northern Nigeria. As part of their daily chores, the teacher of the “madarasatul” (Quranic School) goes through teaching the students mostly between 5 years and 16 years in the mornings while they are allowed to go and engage in “bara” (begging) and return either for the afternoon session or return late and go to bed. Because these children are sent from different homes to the school for Quranic education, oftentimes no fees are paid, neither do their parents send monies for the upkeep. Subsequently, the children grow-up seeing their seniors going to beg and coming back with rewards of cash, some of which is shared with the teachers (also known as Mallam). This same cognition process is what can ultimately be used to change their attitude and behaviour by exhibiting to them the role models, significant others and members of their society who have achieved better life and feeding as well as still acquiring Islamic education without engaging in begging.

Indeed as many scholars will attest, begging is prohibited in Islam except on very few cases as clearly stated. The role of the media is to highlight and showcase the persons who have acquired both Quranic education as well as western education and are progressing in life through the acquisition of skills and knowledge most of which are through western education or apprenticeship. This theoretical framework helps explain the ease with which street-beggars grew into the tradition by seeing other persons earn a living through begging.

Methodology

This study deployed the use of qualitative and quantitative instruments in order to establish the factors behind this social malady and how to proffer solutions. A random sample of 150 respondents was chosen and survey conducted applying questionnaires to gather data on the causes of child street-begging, its threats to society as well as propose how the media can be used in eradicating this malaise. In conducting the survey, the following demographics emerged. The data collected showed that 50 children were below 16 years, 62 adults between 17 – 40 years while some clerics, household-heads and traditional rulers made up another 20 respondents. 8 persons did not respond.

In discussing the research methodology of this study, it is pertinent to state that in order to be able to situate the empirical situation of the mindset behind the malaise, quantitative survey method was deployed using the likert scale of analysis. Because of the large concentration of the street-beggars within the metropolis, Sokoto south local government and indeed precincts of Ahmadu Bello Way and Emir Yahaya were chosen, while a semi-urban by rural society of Yabo was also selected for study. At least two interviews conducted as a qualitative instrument figured out and corroborated the findings of the

empirical study using questionnaires. This is necessary in order to get a more robust detailed causative set of factors from the respondents. This triangulation helped to authenticate and support the findings of the qualitative instrument.

Findings

The study showed that the larger numbers of the street children have no skills with which they can earn a living and even where the almajiri schools provide that outlet, their mindset and attitude have already been internalized by the realities of reward for begging, as evidenced in the society cognitive theory.

Amongst the respondents who were asked “why do you think these children begging on the street don’t want to attend the Almajiri schools, 60% said they needed to beg to help take money back to their parents, 30% said they didn’t like education and it was difficult while 5% were happy to roam the street out of habit. When asked if they were aware of the Almajiri schools and the negative image of their continued stay on the street, 62% were aware, while 30% were not. When asked if education was better than begging, 58% said no, 30% said yes and 12% abstained (didn’t know).

Conducting a Key Informant Interview with an Islamic scholar Mallam Umaru in Yabo, he was asked why child street-beggars still exist, he opined that it was a tradition that had been nurtured over the centuries and was not expected to be wiped out overnight, especially as some parents and some religious scholars benefit from this malady. Another traditional village head in Yar Goriba Mallam Audu confirmed the supremacy of culture, tradition and religion on this matter “it is a long process to attempt to re-educate our people. It is a long process that will require time and energy from government and the media”.

Further analysis of the data collected showed a glaring gap of the absence of an articulated media strategy involving both conventional and indigenous traditional media.

Media as Panacea

Jegede (2010) in analyzing the impact of the mass media on development issues opined that due to its inability to reach far-flung communities and its resort to a few languages and dialects in its broadcast, the media diminishes its impact as a tool for social change. Okwori (2008) also posits that the mass media is top down in nature and structure as inherited from the colonialists. Therefore with the inability of the mass media to utilize more than half of Nigeria's over 300 languages and dialects, attitudinal change remains rather restricted.

Theorists of behavior change communication whose locus is Third World emphasize the inevitability of participatory communication in the process of change in attitude. The stages of participatory communication involves the horizontal process of sensitizing the society, getting the stakeholders and in this case parents involved in the communication strategy of the project. The works of Paolo Freire (1971), Everett Rogers (1962), Jegede (2010) all amplify the merits of horizontal communications where the community, the society remain the focal point and as such their inputs and participation at every stage from invitation to conclusion is desirable. Zaplicki (1989) posits that;

Educative and participatory approach based on horizontal communication mainly through interpersonal and group channels, using the so called inter media in order to facilitate the communicational process is supported in some parts of the world by the oral media as well as songs, dances, community meetings, people theatre (Pg 109).

Akinfeleye (1989) describes this participatory platform of horizontal communication as "a situation when both the communicator and the communicated are within the same frequency and wavelength." To achieve effective participation of the masses, they must be motivated so as to cause a modification or change in their pattern of attitude and desired behaviour. The cultural, religious traditional and political climate and the diversities of such an environment must be understood and delivered by the media both mass media and traditional local oral media (Akinfeleye 1989:125).

Another Development communication scholar Osso (1989), situates behavior change within the context of participatory platforms as he states "social change must involve behavioral and attitudinal and cognitive changes of the individual level... The process must be people-centred and participatory" (Osso 1989:151)

Behavior change within the context of stakeholders persuasion process involves the engagement of the media especially the traditional oral media in compliment to the process where "the individual and the communities own the process and content of communication", according to the Rockefeller Foundation. This is because the provision of information, acquisition of knowledge, understanding the relevant issues and situations are pre-requisites for behavior change and sustainable development (Osso 1989:151).

The process is further explained that "emphasis shifts from persuasion and transmission of information from outside to dialogue, debate and negotiation on issues that resonate with members of the community"

Amobi (2012) argues that an integrated model which stresses the importance of horizontal communication the role of people as agents of change and the need for

negotiating skills and partnerships are very necessary, relying on individual choices and behaviors often mediated by social relationships. It is obvious that despite the campaign and mobilization using jingles, public service announcements and coverage of poverty-related information, messages and programmes, the mass media has still not overcome this social malaise in society.

Abah (2005), realizing the inadequacies of reach and limited language options on radio and television programming, advocated the use of this inter-media adaptation of full utilization of the strengths and reach of the mass media in tandem and in synergy with traditional indigenous media to effect this kind of attitudinal change in behaviour. For change to take place the mass media must engage the use of all its platforms while its shortcomings and inadequacies which include lack of electricity and choice of languages of message delivery are taken care of by the exploitation of intimacy and commonality provided for in oral traditions, songs, poetry theatre, dances, festivals etc. Abah (2005) further illustrates that "the use of local languages and dialects as well as imagery and festivals along with oral traditions make them very attractive instruments for development planners".

Child-beggars as development catalysts and manpower units become the focus, when their plight is examined in the context of the kind and quality of citizens, they will become in future. Therefore an effective process of enablement of their mindset, attitudes and behaviors requires that government along with empowering schools, providing free education, free feeding and transport must engage the children and their parents with a strategy to get them to own the process of keeping them off the streets. They must be actively involved in the design and execution of the advocacy campaign to take children off the streets. While the dependency theory puts the blame of underdevelopment and its socio-

economic effects on the industrialized nations, the process of development, emancipation, economic independence and good governance must be owned and executed by citizens of the country with the collective spirit of self determination and national pride. This requires proper planning and execution of policies while ensuring that the desired change in behavior of these street children are forcefully pursued and the society is galvanized and propagated by a society convinced of the advantages of eradicating the menace of street-begging by children. The complimentary platforms of participatory communication, conventional mass media and the synergy available for the utilization of the traditional indigenous oral media of such targeted communities can provide the necessary impetus and panacea for the reduction, if not eradication of child street-begging.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, this study examined the impact of child street-begging on our socio-economic wellbeing and the concomitant implication on society. The study examined the causes and implication of the malady of street-begging by children. It also proffered solutions using more participatory platforms in a triangular interface of the conventional mass media, interpersonal, traditional indigenous media as well as communal, interactive participatory tools. The study found out that the main driving cause of street-begging is more economic, but also buoyed and stiffly engendered by religious intervening forces, reinforced by long standing tradition and values difficult to exterminate within a short period.

The forces and power dynamics of the structure of society which has provided for a widening gap between the rich and the poor, the privilege and the underprivileged have all compelled the downward spiral of poverty and

destitution on the masses of northern Nigeria, not withstanding the country's position as an oil-rich country. The interplay of a huge unmanageable population, sixty percent without any skills further aggravates the situation.

Recommendations

- In conclusion therefore, the findings of this study requires an urgent need on the part of government to find and refresh economic policies that will alleviate the poverty situation in the country and the north in particular.
- The society needs to do more in sensitizing its members on the need to only procreate within tolerable limits as it is

unfortunate to bring babies into this world without a clear plan and strategy as to how to raise them or the wherewithal to feed them.

- The media must, as part of its core functions of enlightenment make the populace more aware and responsive to the need to learn skills in both almajiri and western education schools.
- The media must drive a behaviour change agenda using the social cognitive theory in up-scaling its attention to members of society rewarded through hardwork rather than through begging.

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