



# INTEGRATED QUR'ANIC EDUCATION

## Nigeria Case Study



### **About the Author**

Semere Solomon, a Senior Associate at Creative Associates International since 2003, has more than 30 years of experience in education and civil society programs, with an emphasis on education policy and systems development. He has been involved in different capacities in three USAID-supported education projects (COMPASS, NEI, and Education Crisis response) in Nigeria since 2004. He currently oversees Creative's education programs in Nigeria, Pakistan and Zambia.

Semere's experience in systems development includes more than seven years of successfully directing the formulation of education policy, human resource development, teacher training, research, planning and Education Management Information Systems as a Director General of Planning and Development in the Ministry of Education in his native Eritrea. He has also served as a Senior Education Planner for UNESCO-Iraq and the United Nations Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, where he led educational assessments, data collection/syntheses, and multi-sector policy formulation for vulnerable families.

Semere has a Graduate Diploma in Educational Planning and Administration from the UNESCO International Institute for Education Planning in France, and a master's in Sustainable Development and Diplomacy from EUCLID University's School of Business and Economics and School of Diplomacy and International Affairs. He is a native speaker of Tigrigna, fluent in English, and has working knowledge of French, Italian, Amharic and Arabic. Semere is also the recipient of Creative's Senior Employee of the Year award in 2009.

SemereS@creativcdc.com

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Creative Associates International  
5301 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20015  
202.966.5804  
[www.CreativeAssociatesInternational.com](http://www.CreativeAssociatesInternational.com)

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Less than 30 percent of school-aged children in Northern Nigeria are estimated to have basic literacy and numeracy skills.

# Abstract

Tens of millions of children around the globe who do not attend formal schooling are considered to be out of school. A sizable number of these out-of-school children learn in nonformal settings. Throughout several countries in Asia and Africa where Islam is predominant, many out-of-school children attend nonformal schools called Qur'anic schools. Dating back hundreds of years, these schools cater to the spiritual needs of Muslim children and are places these

children go to memorize and recite the Qur'an. In Nigeria, total enrollment at these schools is estimated at over 9.5 million, concentrated in the mostly Muslim North. These students constitute the largest group of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

This paper examines the nature of these schools broadly and in the context of Northern Nigeria in particular. It will try to shed some light on the role these schools play in Muslim/ Islamic societies, how they are

perceived by local communities, and their comparative advantage over formal schools given the agrarian/rural nature of the environment under which they operate. The paper will also outline current global strategies to universalize basic education and discuss how the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), in alignment with these strategies, plans to transform Qur'anic schools as centers of learning to fast-track its national education reforms. It will later detail how the Nigeria

Northern Education Initiative (NEI), a USAID-funded education project implemented by Creative Associates International from 2010 to 2014, collaborated with local governments to incorporate core subjects such as literacy and numeracy, along with vocational training, into the Qur'anic curriculum and mainstream them into the basic education system in Northern Nigeria. In conclusion, the paper will review best practices that could be replicated elsewhere.

## Fourteen-year-old Ammar Muhammad is going to school.

*Not just any school, but a school for gifted children thanks to his encounter two years ago with USAID-NEI's basic literacy program at his nonformal, or Almajiri school.*

*Born to nomadic parents in Jalingo, Taraba state, Ammar lost his father three years ago while attending an Almajiri school in Gwaram, local government area of Bauchi state. Thankfully for Ammar, his Almajiri school was one of the 200 public and Almajiri schools selected by USAID-NEI to be a demonstration school that provided a literacy and numeracy program. Unlike many others, Ammar*

*passed the examinations set by the nonformal schools board ANFEA and graduated to formal primary school to study for another three years before enrolling in a secondary school. He was one of the 200 Almajiri pupils from NEI's 40 demonstration Almajiri schools in Bauchi state to transition to formal schools in 2011.*

*After Ammar and four other Almajiri pupils were admitted to Central Primary School, Gwaram, they were reassessed and three of them were promoted to Basic Class Five, based on their performance. Ammar's excellent performance earned him a*

*seat at the 2012 Bauchi State Special Secondary Schools Examination—an examination for entrance into one of the three schools for gifted pupils in the state. Ammar passed the exam and aptitude test and joined the Special Science Secondary School in Toro. Ammar has since adapted to boarding school life and is doing well academically. His plan is to graduate and earn a university admission. "I want to be a doctor, to help my people," he told USAID-NEI just before registering at his new school. Ammar's success in formal schooling will be an inspiration to other pupils and teachers at Almajiri schools across the state.<sup>1</sup>*

# NIGERIA: Context

Nigeria has a population of 168.8 million, nearly equally divided between Muslims (mainly in the North) and Christians. The GDP is estimated at US \$459.6 billion with an annual growth rate of 6.7%, making it the biggest economy in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>2</sup> Nigeria is also the biggest oil exporter in Africa and endowed with large reserves of human resources. The country has the potential to build a prosperous economy, significantly reduce poverty, and provide health, education, and infrastructure services to

meet its population needs.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, decades of military rule, coupled with a patronage-based political system, has undermined Nigerian governance structures, resulting in flawed democratic processes marked by a lack of accountability and limited capacity at all levels of government.<sup>4</sup>

The Nigerian National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) attributes this state of affairs to poverty and inequality, poor economic management, weak and ineffectual public sector,

and hostile environment for private-sector growth.

Due to persistent neglect in the midst of these internal problems, the country's formal education system has over the years fallen into severe disrepair. Although Nigeria has made some recent strides towards boosting coverage and standards in education, the existing European-style system is still characterized by poor quality of education; low enrollment rate of school-aged children (UNESCO reports there were 8,709,243

out-of-school children of primary school age in Nigeria in 2010);<sup>5</sup> dilapidated infrastructure; lack of basic instructional materials and furniture; high rate of unqualified teachers; weak and under-resourced channels of decision making; and weak relationship between parents and schools. Consequently, many parents have lost confidence in the formal school system. In Northern Nigeria, Muslim parents look to the traditional Qur'anic schools as a viable alternative to public schools.<sup>6</sup>



Although Nigeria has the largest economy in Africa, it invests less in education than most other countries on the continent.



The Nigerian government estimates there are 9 million Almajiri students attending Qur'anic schools—some as young as four years old.

# Almajiri Children and the Qur'anic School System: An Old Tradition Facing Modern Challenges



The prevalence of Islamic learning centers that teach the recitation and memorization of the Qur'an dates back to the seventh century with the spread of Islam in many parts of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.<sup>7</sup>

Before Christian missionaries introduced western education to Nigeria during the British colonial period, Qur'anic schools were the norm in the country. While the British established administrative structures and schools in the predominately Christian South, they allowed the predominantly Muslim North to maintain their traditional systems, including the Qur'anic schools. This difference in education systems in Northern and Southern Nigeria persists today.<sup>8</sup>

These traditional learning centers (commonly referred to as *Qur'anic* or *Tsangaya*) are mobile education centers that revolve around the *Ma'alam*, a spiritual teacher who travels from place to place with a few pupils, temporarily settling on the outskirts of a city or town, to teach the Qur'an. Functioning under different, oftentimes unconventional, settings (e.g., in a mosque, under the shade of a tree, underneath an open sky),<sup>9</sup> these nonformal schools are concerned foremost with addressing the spiritual needs of the learners and offering them avenues for growth in the faith.<sup>10</sup>

Here, children study the Qur'an only—core subjects such as math and reading are

not included in the Qur'anic curriculum. As part of their daily ritual, the students sit on mats (or on the bare floor or ground), hold their written wooden slates (*allo*), and recite the verses of the Holy Qur'an—repeating them continually—until they have thoroughly memorized them.<sup>11</sup>

While these Qur'anic schools have functioned well in the past, this system—long left unregulated and unsupported by government or local communities—leaves much to be desired. The children who attend, known as *Almajiri* (children who leave their homes and families to study the Qur'an),<sup>12</sup> typically come from Nigeria's poorest families and thus are generally unable to contribute financially to the schools. As a result, these institutions are under-funded and poorly accommodated, often lacking basic necessities such as learning materials and furniture. Also lacking is the quality of the education provided since the *Ma'alams* in charge are often untrained and uncertified.<sup>13</sup>

Tending also to be poor and unsalaried,<sup>14</sup> the *Ma'alams* rely on their students for their livelihood, sending them off every day to beg for food or money in the streets.<sup>15</sup> What these children manage to procure, for themselves and for their *Ma'alams*, is usually all that they have to subsist on.

Despite these schools' perceived failings, many traditional



“While these Qur'anic schools have functioned well in the past, this system—long left unregulated and unsupported by government or local communities—leaves much to be desired.”

societies such as the Muslim Hausa and Fulani of Northern Nigeria prefer these institutions to formal schooling. Dr. Khalid, in a presentation delivered at the National Symposium on *Almajiri* Education in Nigeria in 2013, argued that these traditional and religious institutions, due to their flexible timetable, are more appropriate for rural societies that rely solely on agriculture for their subsistence. Because these schools have multiple entry points (children can enroll in the schools at any time of the year provided they are in session), parents can schedule their child's school attendance around seasonal agricultural activities. This

flexibility also allows students to progress at their own pace. The local primary schools, in contrast, have a single entry point at the beginning of each academic year and a complex admission process entailing much paper work that agrarian societies are not comfortable with. Dr. Khalid also points out that the schools' egalitarian outlook and affordability (no school fees, no uniforms, no texts and notebooks, no feeding and transport money, etc.) are also extremely attractive to parents. Above all, these schools do not alienate children from their traditional occupations whereas the formal schools do.<sup>16</sup>



Nigeria has more out-of-school children today than any country in the world—10.5 million—of whom 60 percent are girls living in the North, according to the United Nations.

# Universal Basic Education: A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics (UIS), 61 million children of primary school age were out of school in 2010, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for one-half of this total worldwide.<sup>17</sup>

Children drop out due to poverty, social marginalization, irrelevant/poor education content,<sup>18</sup> and/or conflicting social or economic obligations.<sup>19</sup> Conflict and post-conflict situations, as well as natural calamities (e.g., typhoons, floods, earthquakes), are also temporary or long-term reasons for not attending school. Because failure to attend school leads to entrenchment in a lifetime of poverty, many developing countries have set national priorities to universalize basic education. And yet despite this desire to expand access to education, many governments still do not recognize—let alone support—alternative programs such as community schools, mobile schools, and Qur'anic schools as centers of learning.<sup>20</sup>

Conventional systems of education characterized by their daytime class sessions, residence- and age-based enrollments, teacher-delivered standards for national curricula, six-year learning cycle (in the case of primary level), and their almost exclusive focus on urban and future-oriented knowledge and cognitive competencies is the only one way to provide access to education in many developing countries. However, in the years following the 1990 Education for All (EFA) Convocation in Jomtien, Thailand, many countries are realizing that they need to consider alternative forms of learning outside the mainstream of formal education to improve access to quality education and meet their education reform goals.<sup>21</sup> This realization has steered many developing countries toward designing and implementing a new approach characterized by diversification of the delivery system.

What is meant by diversification? The Association for the Development of Education

in Africa (ADEA) report on *Diversifying Educational Delivery Systems* interprets diversification as greater recognition of multiple and diverse learning needs, the need for multiple arrangements and technologies for creating learning experiences, and the need for a system-wide framework for accrediting learning outcomes. The report underscores the importance of determining appropriate modes of educational provision and how to manage them. It also emphasizes the move away from supply-led thinking to demand-led thinking, and from education to learning, which in turn will require a decentralized, creative decision-making approach and the institutional framework to make it work.<sup>22</sup>

Diversification also calls for different delivery approaches that would require creating a flexible timetable, using multiple shifts to reach the widest possible audience, recruiting local teachers (qualified and unqualified), introducing multi-grade classes to make opti-

imum use of teachers, introducing multimedia instruction, and encouraging the private sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious organizations, civic society organizations, and individuals to participate in the provision of education. It necessitates implementing regular programs and Accelerated Learning Programs (ALPs) and developing high-standard curricular content relevant and responsive to beneficiaries' needs. Moreover, diversification calls for its customization to different settings (e.g., rural and urban; nomadic and sedentary; religious and secular).

Diversification also means that accreditation must include the whole spectrum of accreditation bodies, from the most formal to the most informal.<sup>23</sup> Thus the need for an overall quality assurance system that enables diverse forms of provision to grow—but within strict criteria for access and quality—should also be recognized and strictly enforced.<sup>24</sup>

# A Push for Universal BASIC EDUCATION

Nigeria demonstrated its commitment to universalize basic education by signing the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in September 2000. Since then, various policies, strategies, and institutional frameworks have been put in place. Notwithstanding such measures, the situation of out-of-school children is still alarming.

In Nigeria's Muslim North, low enrollment and retention is compounded by poor quality of education, causing several stakeholders (parents) to lose confidence in the educational system. The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), aware of this problem, has been trying to correct this trend in collaboration with public and private partners. An area the government is eager to bring about changes is the Almajiri phenomenon, to speed up its intervention to provide this group of children with access to basic education. Accordingly, the FGN established the National Committee on Implementation of Almajiri Education in October 2010 as follow-up to the Ministerial Committee on Madrasah, whose objective

was to ensure that all children attending Qur'anic schools are mainstreamed into the Universal Basic Education Scheme. Their goals for Qur'anic integration included the following:

- *Improving the teaching-learning environment and strengthening teaching capacity in the Qur'anic schools*
- *Integrating elements of basic education into the Qur'anic school system to improve learners' capacities without interfering with the goals of the Qur'anic schools*
- *Equipping the Qur'anic school students with the knowledge and skills necessary to integrate into the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Program*
- *Enhancing social mobility of Qur'anic school students.*<sup>25</sup>

Since its inception, the Government's UBE program has made substantial progress that includes i) developing the National Framework for the Development and Integration of Almajiri Education; ii) conducting advocacy meetings with major stakeholders to change attitudes toward secular education iii) harmonizing curricula for the Almajiri Education Program; iv) adopting three models of



Prof. Tahir Gidado, Chairman of the National Symposium on Almajiri Education Program in Nigeria, summarizes the importance of flexibility and quality of the program as follows:

“Since Almajiri Education can be implemented by an individual, community group, civil society organization, International Development Partners and the State Actors, we should expect a multitude of program types that calls for robust quality assurance strategies to bring them in line. This is very important for the state actors to note. The point here is that there should first be a level playing ground so that every willing entity can partake in it without encumbrances. This way, more opportunities are created for the Almajiri to have unhindered access to UBE. Logically this assertion calls for flexibility in implementation. However, we must insist that the education they get is in no way inferior in view of the mainstreaming expectation at the end of whatever stage of learning a child concludes.”

intervention; and v) setting up 89 model Almajiri schools in 25 states.<sup>26</sup> Although these efforts were a move in the right direction, there were a number of challenges faced during implementation. Chief among them were those associated with i) states' adoption and replication of the program; ii) recruitment and deployment of teachers; iii) payment of teachers' salaries and allowances; iv) lack of an

appropriate mechanism to enroll the Almajiri into schools; v) failure to include school feeding as a retention strategy; vi) reluctance of Qur'anic school proprietors (*Alaramas*) to integrate into the program; vii) lack of effective management; and viii) and lack of facilities. Lack of proper monitoring, clear policies, and serious commitment on Qur'anic integration at state level also posed challenges.<sup>27</sup>



Integrating elements of basic education such as literacy and numeracy improved students' capacity and knowledge without interfering with the more traditional goals of the Qur'anic schools.



A formal education system in disrepair is one factor leading parents to enroll their children in nonformal education like Qur'anic schools. More than half the children in Sokoto state have never attended a formal school.



# NIGERIA

# Northern Education Initiative

## Introduction to NEI

The Nigeria Northern Education Initiative (NEI)<sup>28</sup> was a four-year basic education project funded by USAID and implemented in partnership with the Federal Government of Nigeria. NEI was implemented by Creative Associates International in collaboration with four U.S.- and two Nigeria-based partners, state governments, and a number of local NGOs. This initiative covered two northern states—Bauchi and Sokoto—and was aimed at i) strengthening states' and local governments' capacity to deliver quality basic education and ii) increasing access to education (and related services) for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC).

### **NEI staff worked with communities, local government, and state agencies to do the following:**

- Establish community coalitions; set up an OVC referral system for education and health services; enhance teachers' ability to teach literacy and numeracy to OVC; establish nonformal learning centers; provide OVC support packages; and provide access to vocational training
- Deliver supplementary OVC support activities by training teachers and OVC support persons in mentoring, psychosocial counseling, and hygiene; implement an adolescent girls' program and kids' clubs; and build communities' and caregivers' capacity to support OVC education and well-being
- Adapt the national OVC plan of action in each state to strengthen systems for increasing access to education and health services; strengthen capacity of OVC-responsible Ministries and officers; develop procedures to integrate academic subjects into Qur'anic schools; and build capacity to integrate OVC into formal schools<sup>29</sup>



The Nigeria Northern Education Initiative encouraged Qur'anic school leaders to enrich their curricula with core basic education subjects like literacy and numeracy, and to periodically examine their pupils and graduate them into formal schools.



## Working with Qur'anic Schools: Laying the Groundwork

To increase orphans' and vulnerable children's access to basic education, health information, and counseling and referral services, (NEI) established 80 (40 per state) Nonformal Learning Centers (NFLCs)<sup>30</sup> in the two intervention states. These centers were primarily based in existing Qur'anic schools where local Ma'alams teach the recitation of the Qur'an. Following a series of consultations with Ma'alams and agencies in charge of nonformal education, certain Qur'anic schools were chosen to integrate literacy and numeracy education (boko) into their programs (at specific days and times each week).

The pupils for the program were selected following a vetting process that utilized the Child Status Index (CSI).<sup>31</sup> The average number of pupils per nonformal learning center was 40, bringing a total of 1600 OVC per state to be supported by the project. The major intervention in these NFLCs was the delivery of basic literacy, numeracy, life skills, and vocational training to older children in the Qur'anic schools. In addition, psychosocial counseling and a kids' forum<sup>32</sup> supplemented the basic literacy program to boost orphans' and vulnerable children's self-esteem and prepare them for lifelong learning and achievement. The project also

targeted other orphans and vulnerable children in 120 formal schools that the NEI project was mandated to work with.<sup>33</sup>

The process began with a comprehensive assessment of existing Qur'anic schools to identify those that met the criteria set in collaboration with government agencies in charge of nonformal education. In tandem with these efforts, NEI staff also engaged local NGOs providing similar services to out-of-school orphans and vulnerable children in view of assessing their facilities and programs. Furthermore, they conducted a learning labor market survey in collaboration with state departments, minis-

tries, and agencies.<sup>34</sup>

The results of the survey and the recommendations for the learning centers were shared with the OVC Technical Working Groups (TWGs) and major stakeholders at the state level, which included Commissioners, Permanent Secretaries, Civic Society Organizations (CSOs), and partner NGOs. The assessment spelt out priority needs in terms of OVC



In total the NEI project supported 1600 orphans and vulnerable children in Bauchi and Sokoto states.



education programs, supplies, infrastructure, and staffing. The technical working groups also developed a plan for strengthening existing learning centers and creating new ones, which included making physical improvements, recruiting and training facilitators, and developing learning programs and materials.

NEI's initial efforts focused on providing support to the se-

lected learning centers. Grants helped local NGOs to support center proprietors and provide training in grant management. NEI technical support to NGOs also included the training of facilitators on program content (literacy, numeracy, life skills, and psychosocial counseling). In addition, NEI experts collected and reviewed materials from successful programs throughout Nigeria and supplied

students with relevant learning materials. This process culminated in the development of a core literacy, numeracy, and life skills program that was later incorporated into the existing learning centers' programs and implemented in its entirety in the newly established learning centers. The program and materials—as well as a facilitator training program—were piloted before being rolled out.<sup>36</sup>

NEI conducted media campaigns to educate the public about the importance of the Nonformal Learning Centers in supporting orphans and vulnerable children. Activities included producing short radio programs, jingles, and informational meetings for representatives of the Community Coalitions (CC)<sup>37</sup> set up to support this initiative.<sup>38</sup>

# Synchronization with Government Policies

For projects to succeed and sustain, they must operate under governments' existing national policies. For the NEI, this meant aligning its objectives and activities with the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the National Benchmark for Nonformal Education. These policies were aimed at achieving the following:

- Enhancing political will among policymakers at all levels to commit resources for integrating core subjects into Qur'anic schools
- Increasing awareness among stakeholders on the importance of the integration program and reducing resistance through sensitization, advocacy, and community dialogue
- Creating an enabling environment for learning in Qur'anic schools
- Increasing interagency linkages and partnerships between Government, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and other development partners working towards achieving Education for All (EFA) goals
- Empowering learners with vocational and life skills for their socioeconomic well-being
- Increasing enrollment, retention, and completion of quality basic education of learners.<sup>39</sup>

NEI's approach recognized the unique challenges and opportunities that the situation in Northern Nigeria posed. It ensured that all the assumptions were based on research and proven international practices. It also started from what existed. Central to NEI's approach was to collaborate with host-country counterparts to identify the right starting point and strategy and include built-in mechanisms that could be tailored to states' needs and entry points. The NEI approach encouraged simplicity, maximum utility, and cost-effectiveness consistent with the country's ability to sustain the system. Also, the project worked with government at all levels to plan for the routine and reasonable commitment of professional and financial resources needed to maintain the program.

# Building Capacity Among Counterparts

Sustaining NEI efforts would come to fruition only if project and national counterparts can successfully collaborate. NEI recognized the need for agencies, departments, and ministries to take the lead on providing access to the Almajiri. In collaboration with these agencies, not only did NEI assess the status of Qur'anic education, but it also recommended a plan that could be integrated into their Medium-Term Sector Strategy (MTSS). It also helped the agencies build their capacities to review program progress, plan and execute the program with high standard, and adapt the national curriculum to state peculiarities for the Almajiri. NEI also provided technical support

to capture and analyze data for decision making and planning.

Services to Qur'anic schools also entailed partnering with local NGOs and other civil society organizations to provide them with the technical, operational, and financial support needed to design and implement interventions to complement governments' strategies to deliver quality basic education.

By accessing NGO databases active in Bauchi and Sokoto states, NEI was able to identify the most capable NGOs to participate in the program. NEI then brought the NGOs together to explain the concept of working with Qur'anic schools

and to outline the project's objectives and modalities of implementation. (NGO involvement later became one of the key factors for unhindered implementation of the NEI project despite the security challenges in Bauchi state in particular.)<sup>40</sup> The NEI grant process required that NEI field offices train local NGOs on proposal writing and program management of Nonformal Learning Centers (NFLCs), Kids' Forums (KFs), Adolescent Girls' Programs (AGPs), and Community Coalitions (CCs). Refresher training to local NGOs continued throughout the life of the project. In sum, these efforts resulted in the smooth execution of grants allocated for

intervention support.<sup>41</sup>

To ensure quality, support mechanisms were put in place for NGO grantees through Memoranda of Understanding signed by the NGOs and NEI. Targets were set for NGOs and supported by clearly defined work plans and budgets. NEI reviewed and approved the documents and verified quarterly financial and programmatic reports. In addition, NEI conducted monthly monitoring exercises to track progress, correct errors, and provide constructive feedback to participating NGOs.<sup>42</sup> The local NGOs that underwent this evaluation process were at a later stage able to access funding from other donor agencies.

The project's education support system promoted the participation of teachers and Ma'alams in continuous professional development to enhance their training and make changes in the classroom more sustainable.



P4E

Objective  
① Identify  
of app  
and describe the uses  
measuring tools  
Identifying tools  
Boys | Girls  
Knife  
Spoon

Basic-Techniques  
Wood work hand-to  
Tools are needed to work  
Production of good wood pro  
made  
Can  
and

of numbers from 1-5

class work.

$$\begin{array}{r} (2) \quad 3 \quad 2 \\ + 1 \quad 3 \\ \hline 4 \quad 5 \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} (1) \quad 3 \quad 4 \\ + 3 \quad 2 \\ \hline \end{array}$$
$$\begin{array}{r} (2) \quad 2 \quad 4 \\ + 2 \quad 4 \\ \hline \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} (3) \quad 5 \quad 5 \\ + 2 \quad 3 \\ \hline 7 \quad 8 \end{array}$$



NEI trained more than 3,500 classroom teachers and facilitators in four thematic areas: literacy, math, life skills and psychosocial counseling.

## Flexible Approach

NEI introduced a flexible delivery system to reach as many out-of-school children as possible. The flexible timetable allowed learners to continue to participate in activities like farming, trading, and domestic chores. It also introduced an accelerated learning program that fast-tracked children's ability to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. Both formal and nonformal structures

(under the shade of a tree, mosque premises, community-provided spaces, and formal school classrooms after the usual school hours, etc.) were used to provide access. The program, along with literacy and numeracy, also provided vocational training (e.g., embroidery, knitting, pomade making) to incentivize students to remain in the program and graduate.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the

project employed a number of teachers who were not necessarily qualified (possessing the minimum teaching qualifications to earn the National Certificate in Education).<sup>44</sup>

NEI ensured that certain quality standards were maintained despite the flexibility of the program delivery system. It introduced an education support system that promoted the participation of teachers/

Ma'alams in an NEI-designed Continuous Professional Development Scheme (CPDS). NEI in collaboration with state agencies also designed and implemented a two-layer monitoring system in which NGO officers monitored centers' activities as well as exercises conducted by governmental (state and local) partners.<sup>45</sup>

## Integrating Core Subjects

The primary focus of a Qur'anic education is to cater to the spiritual needs of the learners and to provide them with avenues for growth in the faith.<sup>46</sup> But to make nonformal education relevant to the needs of modern-day Nigeria, the learners who attend also need to pursue an advanced level of secular education. With this end in mind, the program implemented by NEI aimed to integrate core subjects into the Qur'anic curriculum to enable learners to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to meet the challenges of the modern world,<sup>47</sup> but doing so in keeping with Islamic values and ideals. By combining the traditional with the modern, the NEI education package hopes to meet the complex religious, vocational, and psychosocial needs of millions of children in Northern Nigeria. The pro-

gram's social and moral impact cannot be overestimated since it provides what the formal education system cannot in its present form.<sup>48</sup>

As a follow-up to the development of a national benchmark to integrate core subjects into Qur'anic schools,<sup>49</sup> NEI took part in a school mapping exercise to capture data on existing schools in Northern Nigeria. The examination of "state tours"—tours taken of states where integration of core subjects had been successfully implemented—played a major role in mobilizing public opinion on the importance of integration. NEI also conducted advocacy campaigns to promote the importance of integration and win the trust of the communities by dispelling their fears and concerns.<sup>50</sup> All means possi-

ble—print media, radio and television, drama, fliers and posters, sermons, and roundtable discussions—were used to disseminate the message.

The basic education programs offered at the integrated Qur'anic centers provided nine months of accelerated teaching of basic literacy (reading and writing) and numeracy, the equivalent of three years' literacy and numeracy content covered in a formal school's primary grades 1-3. The language of the immediate environment was used as the medium of instruction. NEI also provided an additional two years of accelerated teaching of literacy and mathematics equivalent to three years' of formal school learning, primary grades 4-6. The medium of instruction was English.<sup>51</sup> To complete the two-part curriculum in the

timeframe recommended, a minimum of six contact hours per week was required. A period of thirty minutes was slated for the effective delivery of each lesson. To avoid conflict in the sharing of hours during the weekdays, use of weekends (e.g., Thursdays and Fridays) was recommended.

The project trained facilitators who guided students in the learning process. NEI introduced an examination to assess student performance at the end of each academic session—students who did well were promoted to the next level. Upon completion of the integrated course, students received a state-recognized Basic Literacy Certificate that allowed them to pursue their studies at the next level.<sup>52</sup>



State agencies and a coalition of 27 nonprofits and community-based organizations identified barriers to educating girls, developed behavior change campaigns and opened special training centers as part of NEI's Adolescent Girls Program.

## Lessons Learned/Best Practices

**Availability of a policy framework:** The NEI initiative to integrate core subjects into the Qur'anic curriculum was well received by the communities because the government had already instituted a policy framework that could readily be used by the project. NEI interventions resonated with the government's policy to expand Integrated Qur'anic education throughout Northern Nigeria. Operating under a conducive policy environment facilitates project implementation.

**Steering Committees (SCs) and Technical Working Groups (TWGs):** Identifying key players in relevant Ministries, Departments, and Agencies whose roles and

responsibilities improve service delivery and provide the technical know-how and exposure ensures the sustainability of interventions. NEI made a conscious effort to work closely with the key players successful in catalyzing change from within. It put in place various mechanisms (steering committees, technical working groups, sub-technical working groups, etc.) to help coordinate and implement agreed-upon activities. The catalysts working within these committees were able to exercise enough influence to expedite changes and hold the government accountable to its sectoral goals and objectives. NEI introduced a culture of efficiency and professional ethics among members of the various

joint working groups, consequently empowering them and boosting their confidence. The establishment of interministerial OVC Steering Committees and four associated Technical Working Groups—OVC Policy (OP), Service Coordination (SC), Girls' Support (GS), and Almajiri Programs (AP)—helped vastly to promote collaboration with state counterparts. The technical working groups were able to assess state-level orphans and vulnerable children, as well as Almajiri policies, programs, definitions, standards of practice, and responsibilities. The TWGs also consulted with stakeholders at state and local-government agency levels to seek consensus on

controversial issues related to OVC. Members met regularly to identify priority areas of action and propose adaptations to NEI intervention states. The steering committees offered strategic guidance and helped to institutionalize OVC support activities. They ensured technicians carried out their duties, provided technical advice, and reported to the steering committees. In short, the SC and TWG structures played a pivotal role in executing NEI activities.

**Interministerial collaboration:** Forming technical working groups with members from relevant Ministries, Departments, and Agencies created synergy and prevented



overlaps of responsibility in allocating resources for basic education. It also fostered a clearer understanding and planning towards achieving state educational goals and objectives through strategic planning workshops. Interministerial groups familiarized themselves with each other's priorities and where they needed to complement and support each other to further their objectives. This mechanism promoted harmony and a sense of belonging to a bigger developmental picture.

**Community-based approach:** The NEI promoted the concept of compassionate communities to promote and champion caring for orphans and vulnerable children.

Applying a community-based approach, the NEI set up Community Coalitions (CCs)<sup>53</sup> to build programs that target whole communities to create within them an awareness and sensitivity for the needs of OVC—and specifically, of girls and Almajiri—to help these children avoid stigmatization and to strengthen networks, systems, and institutions. NEI has proven that community coalitions act as the glue that binds community decision makers together, providing a venue for discussion—and action—on education, health, and OVC concerns. Through the use of a proven tool—Community Action Cycle—community coalitions have enhanced accountability and dialogue between com-

“NEI has proven that community coalitions act as the glue that binds community decision makers together, providing a venue for discussion—and action—on education, health, and OVC concerns.”

## Lessons Learned/Best Practices Continued

munities and the education, health, and OVC systems, thus promoting the sustainability of reforms while ensuring effective service delivery. NEI helped to form 20 community coalitions that comprise 600 members to identify, prioritize, and address the needs of children in the Qur'anic schools.

**Integrating vocational training:** The major intervention implemented in the nonformal learning centers was delivery of a basic literacy program—an accelerated learning program that teaches literacy, numeracy, and life skills, plus vocational skills training. Psychosocial counseling and kids' forums complemented the basic literacy program, with the aim of boosting OVC's self-esteem, thereby reducing their vulnerability and preparing them for lifelong learning and achievement. The vocational skills program implemented alongside the basic literacy program generated demand and heightened the interest of orphans and vulnerable children and their caregivers in accessing basic education. Through the center-based vocational skills and apprenticeship program, some 3,572 OVC, or 24% of students in the program (772 in Bauchi, 2800 in Sokoto), were trained in different marketable vocational

trades and are now providing for themselves.<sup>54</sup> Offering similar programs alongside literacy and numeracy is thus worth looking into. However, caution should be exercised when trying to identify which trades ought to be taught at these centers. Local market labor needs should always be given due consideration.

**Empowering state counterpart capacity:** Implementing the NFLCs program had a significant impact on state counterparts. Through the steering committees and the technical working groups, the agencies (SAME and ANFEA) in charge of nonformal education strengthened their oversight functions. Since inception, the agencies were supported by the NEI in the design, planning, implementation, and monitoring of activities in alignment with the National Benchmark for Nonformal Education. In follow-up efforts to build the capacity of key personnel in these agencies, NEI noted the agencies' efficiency in conducting assessments of the 1600 OVC in 2012. Of the 1600 OVC, 1285 (745 in Bauchi, 540 in Sokoto) passed and were certified with basic literacy certificates. In total, 801, or 50%, OVC [261 in Bauchi, 540 in Sokoto] were mainstreamed into the formal school system



80 percent of orphans and vulnerable children who participated in the project received basic literacy certificates, and 801 of them were mainstreamed into Nigeria's formal school system.

and pursued the next level of education.<sup>55</sup>

**Mainstreaming the Integrated Qur'anic Education Centers:** Integrated Qur'anic Education (IQE) centers in both states are managed by the Adult and Nonformal Education Agency (ANFEA), the State Agency for Mass Education (SAME), the State Universal Basis Education Board (SUBEB), and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA). These centers have

learners with diverse learning backgrounds, some of whom have never attended any formal school or have dropped out of school without completing basic education. This discrepancy in learning is one of the major reasons why basic education is introduced in these learning centers. There, learners are exposed to a nine-month accelerated learning of basic literacy and numeracy, equivalent to a formal school's primary grades 1-3. After graduation





from this initial basic literacy level, learners proceed to the two-year, post-literacy level equivalent to primary grades 4-6, at the end of which they sit for the final exam. If successful, they qualify to join junior secondary level.

**Center-Based Management Committees:** The project helped form the Center-Based Management Committees (CBMCs) for each of the 80 nonformal learning centers in Bauchi and Sokoto states. Each ten-member committee

included a center proprietor, a facilitator, an OVC Support Team member, a representative for the traditional leader, a women's representative, and five members of the community. The CBMCs received training on the Whole School Development Plan and participated in a CBMC forum to evaluate peers and share experiences.

**Using the grants mechanism:** Engaging local NGOs as grantees and building their capacity promotes program reception by local communities

**“3,572 orphans and vulnerable children—24 percent of students in the program—are now providing for themselves with vocational skills they learned through NEI.”**

and enables access to difficult-to-reach target beneficiaries. Under the NEI project, the use of local NGOs masked the project identity in the face of security challenges and project

implementation continued unabated. The NGOs became the primary vehicle for mobilizing existing community structures to implement project activities and provide services.

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The Nigerian government estimates there are 9 million Almajiri students attending Qur'anic schools—some as young as four years old.

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