

# AT-RISK CHILDREN PROJECT

## REPORT ON A 3-DAYS SCOPING MISSION TO SOKOTO STATE



DATE: 6<sup>TH</sup> - 8<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2021



## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The At-Risk Children (ARC) project is designed to provide a multi-dimensional, broad spectrum approach to the crisis of vulnerable children, including the almajiri children in the Northern States. Even though there are diverse individuals and groups working to address these issues, the need for coordination with minimum standards, learning and sharing, thereby ensuring impact at scale, is required.



The ARC Project seeks to provide central coordination of resources, strategies and monitoring to drive a targeted, efficient and cost-effective solution to the distressing phenomenon. The Goal of the ARC is to reduce the vulnerability of children, providing them with a life of dignity, thereby boosting individual and National productivity, as well as security.



The At-Risk Children (ARC) team was in Sokoto State as part of its scoping mission and stakeholder engagement strategy. This initial visit seeks to engage with the key stakeholders in the State, to understand the status of the youth and other vulnerable children that are at-risk, as well as determine the facilities and initiatives that can be leveraged on, in the State.



The findings would provide the team with a broad view of the situation in Sokoto and guide in identifying critical aspects of the existing programmes and initiatives to complement and add value to.

**Activities:**

- Briefing and setting out Agenda with the Executive Chairman Zakat/ Waqf & the Executive Secretary Board of Arabic and Islamic Affairs Sokoto State

- Courtesy visit to His Eminence the Sultan of Sokoto Alh. Dr. Abubakar Sa'ad the III
- Visits to some tsangaya schools and vocational facilities, including a private-owned boarding facility for children orphaned as a result of the insurgency, a weekend school for orphans, adolescents, and women and an agricultural skill acquisition facility for capacity building needs.
- Engagement with some members of the Sokoto State Executive Council, Hon. Commissioners for Education, Women's Affairs, Science & Technology, Animal Husbandry, Agriculture, SUBEB Chairman, representatives of the Ministry of Health & Sports, Chief Imam, Ulama's/tsangaya schools and representatives of Civil Society to discuss the plans for modernising the Almajiri system and other at-risk children in the State.
- Engagement with His Excellency the Executive Governor, and the State Executive Council for discussions and debriefing of our mission following the engagement with the stakeholders in Sokoto State.
- Identification of existing gaps and challenges; recommendations.



## 2.0 ENGAGEMENT WITH SOZACOM & ES ARABIC & ISLAMIC AFFAIRS SOKOTO

The meeting started with the ARC-P team lead, Mrs Maryam Uwais (Special Adviser to the President on Social Investments), giving an overview of the ARC-P and how it intends to leverage on, and add value to existing structures in implementation.





The Executive Chairman SOZECOM Muhammad Lawal Maidoki (Sadaukin Sokoto), informed the team of His Excellency the Governor of Sokoto States' passion and preparedness to work with ARC-Project. They further stated, amongst other things, 'that the Sokoto State Government had gone far in its preparations to kickstart the modernisation of the Tsangaya system, following a study of the PONDOK system in Indonesia'.

Keen on a better appreciation of the modernised system, visits had been conducted to Indonesia by teams, led by the Governor himself. The integration of conventional forms of education with the Islamic teaching had been successful and it was the consensus that Sokoto State should adopt a similar system, as adjusted to the peculiarities of the prevailing culture. The State had identified 5000 Qur'anic schools and so under the 4 cardinal pillars of Islamic Education, Conventional Education, Entrepreneurial Skill Development and Character-building, the State had commenced the process of modernising the tsangaya system of education. The process includes infrastructural development where the Sokoto State Educational Development Committee, under the Chairmanship of the Sultan of Sokoto, would assist to construct infrastructure in 86 districts around all the LGAs of the State. The Governor has also committed to provide land for agriculture in all the schools, working with models:

- a. Individual schools owned by malams-the model is for Tsangaya school owners who agree with the modernisation, and wish to be assisted to be self-sustaining;
- b. Schools supported by Government;
- c. Schools supported by Philanthropists, or by development and financial institutions.

The advent of Covid-19, pandemic had, however, halted the implementation of the State plans.



### 3.0 COURTESY VISIT TO HIS EMINENCE THE SULTAN OF SOKOTO

The ARC-P team subsequently proceeded to visit his Eminence the Sultan of Sokoto.



After being briefed on the mission and vision of ARC-P by the Special Adviser, the Sultan of Sokoto and Chairman Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar III, thanked the ARC-P team, expressing the view that ARC-P clearly aligned with the current efforts of the Sokoto State government in its bid to address the various challenges in the almajiri system. He spoke earnestly about the need for Islamic scholars in the country to enlighten parents towards ensuring their children are educated in both conventional schools, as well as in the Islamic faith, pointing out

that the practice of begging is discouraged in Islam. He further, emphasized that more enlightenment was needed to restore dignity to the almajiri system since it was predicated on scholarship, as well as the search for knowledge. The children, however, needed to be empowered with all forms of education to enable them live a constructive and productive life

He gave an update of the efforts of the Sultanate in supporting the modernization of the tsangaya system, mentioning that he Chairs a Committee that is currently focused on upgrading the infrastructure in 86 districts around Sokoto State. The renovation and construction included the building of schools, boarding facilities and vocational centres for the almajiri children. He welcomed the collaboration with ARC-P since it was bound to add value to the efforts being made by the State towards enhancing the lives of the youth and children, as well as the parents and ulama involved in the ecosystem.

#### 4.0 VISIT TO SOME TSANGAYA SCHOOLS

The following morning, the team visited some tsangaya schools and were received by the Malams, starting from Makarantar Malam Umar, who took the team through their activities. He expressed his willingness to align with the ARC-P initiative and called on the team to key into the existing informal efforts and achievements of SOZACOM to focus & facilitate morale-boosting and entry into more vocational ventures.



1. The team noted that Almajiri schools in Sokoto State, like in many surrounding States, is where boys (almajirai) gather before a Malam (teacher) to study the Qur'an and other Islamic books, but Madarasatul Hadimatul Islamiyya Wal-



tarbiyya, otherwise known as Makarantar Malam Umar Alhadim, has peculiar features that distinguish it from other almajiri schools. At Makarantar Malam Umar Alhadim which is located at Mabera area in Sokoto South Local Government Area, pupils (almajiri) are banned from street begging, despite coming from far distances like Niger, Zamfara and Kebbi States. Mallam Umar said that rather than engaging in begging, the youth and children involved themselves in menial tasks such as the cutting of nails, shoe-shining and washing of plates.

2. Mallam Umar also informed that all the parents or guardians of the pupils must agree to provide sustenance for their children each month before they are enrolled into the school. Apart from this guarantee, there is no other form of payment no matter how long the children stay in the school. This is aside the small trading, (dinkin hula, yankan farce, wanki da guga etc).



Malam Alhadim also said his tsangaya school had a total of 400 pupils, out of which over 300 were boarding students. He added that there were female students who only came during lesson hours and went back home after closing, because he did not have the facilities that would separate them from the boys in compliance with tradition and religion. He added that the day students were charged N200, but that only half of them had paid due to the current economic hardship in the country.





## 5.0 VISIT TO SOME WEEK-END DAY SCHOOLS & VOCATIONAL CENTER

The Team then proceeded to visit some learning centres with combined literacy and vocational training.

(A) The first school was MADARAT-SATUL DARUL ISLAM, a basic education and vocational skill centre that operates at the weekends only. The school operates on the premises of a UBEC accredited primary school with permission from the State Government. Because the premises are utilised as a formal school during the weekdays, they only have access to use it during the weekends. The students include orphans as well as adolescent girls who are married, that reside within the vicinity. They are trained free of charge in electrical works, liquid soap making, hair cream, shampoo and vaseline making, among other skills.





The ARC-P Team Lead while thanking the proprietor of the school, asked pertinent questions that border on welfare, hygiene and health concerns of the children. Apparently, the proprietor had a history of supporting the needy with vocational skills and this was why the State Government had permitted him to use the government premises at the weekend. He pledged to continue working with Sokoto State to enhance the productivity of less-privileged beneficiaries.

The school proprietor, in his response thanked the Presidency for this initiative, appealed for financial support from government, corporate organisations and individuals, saying the 11 teachers in the school were their former students who were volunteering because the school could not afford to recruit external teachers.

After the SUBEB school visit, the Team visited the **Jarma Academy** set up by a private philanthropist, Alhaji Dr Umaru Kwabo who has assumed complete responsibility for the children, including welfare, clothing, accommodation, teachers, school fees, learning facilities, medication and feeding all year round.







The Academy has capacity for 200 children, although it currently consists of a total of 162 children, with 111 orphans from Borno IDP camps, 21 from Yobe State and 30 orphans from the 23 LGAs of Sokoto State. Construction work was going on, however, indicative of the fact that larger numbers were soon to be granted admission. The Nigeria Police and Civil Defence provide security 24 hours, on a shift basis while the Sokoto State Government provides the medical treatment. Furthermore, the Proprietor has endowed a structure in Abuja (with rental income worth N50m) for the running of the school to ensure the children are able to secure an education up to tertiary level. The Academy currently consists of primary, secondary schools, with Qur'anic education, entrepreneurship and character-building sessions.





The school was established to rehabilitate children who had been orphaned as a result of the insurgency in the North East.



## 6.0 ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMISSIONERS & STAKEHOLDERS

A meeting was held that evening with relevant stakeholders in Sokoto State. The Sokoto State Government had evidently begun taking measures to transform almajiri youth and children into assets by affording them opportunities that would ensure that they become productive members of the community. The meeting consisted of Commissioners of Science and Technology, Women Affairs and Social Development, Animal Health and Fisheries as well as Commissioner of Youth and Sports, with Permanent Secretary from the Ministry of Agriculture as well as Chairman of SUBEB, the Director for Public Health and representatives of Islamic scholars and civil society.

In his own remarks, the **Executive Secretary**, Arabic and Islamic Education Board, **Dr Umar Dandinmahe**, thanked the Special Adviser and her team for the efforts being made to improve the standards of almajiri system of education through the At-Risk Children Project. He restated his Board's commitment towards ensuring the success of modern Almajiri system as a responsibility assigned to his office by the Sokoto State Government, while commending all stakeholders for their support.

**The Chairman, Sokoto State Zakkat and Endowment Commission, Malam Lawal Maidoki**, called on Muslims to support the reform of the almajiri system of education in the best interest of the society. He gave a thorough and comprehensive presentation of the State team's visits to Indonesia, narrating the invaluable experience gathered during the fact-finding missions. He cited the example of a one-time President (and one Vice President) of Indonesia as a product of the PANDOK tsangaya system, who returned to serve the PONDOK system after he completed his term in the Presidency.

A presentation was also made by the UNICEF Consultant on Education to the State, who talked about the PONDOK initiative and the role of development partners like UNICEF in ensuring that the State maximizes the opportunity of the modernization of the Tsangaya schools for improved outcomes in education and health in the State. She mentioned that a Summit was planned for the end of March/early April to define the roadmap of the activities the State would engage in for the revamp of the almajiri school system.

The Commissioner for Animals Studies confirmed to members that conventional Almajiri schools were in the process of being re-organized by the Sokoto State Arabic and Islamic Education Board, in collaboration with State MDA's, NGO's and some stakeholders. Work had gone far on the modalities of domesticating the Indonesian PONDOK system, and the plan would soon manifest into reality.



He further restated the government's commitment towards enhancing and improving the original almajiri system of education in the State. "As a government we will continue to remain dedicated towards enhancing the required needs of the society. The State government has taken measures to address the challenges that almajiri children face in today's world by integrating western education with Islamic education, as well as entrepreneurship." He added that the State Government does not condone any scholar encouraging begging by the smaller children in their custody and all steps are being taken to enforce the ban.



**The Hon. Commissioner Science and Technology** spoke about the Sokoto State approach to new educational curriculum, beginning with the operations of the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) as a critical institution because of its mandate to oversee the activities of children within the basic education age group; a demography that is key to ARC-P. The **Commissioner for Women Affairs** in her remarks said the almajiri system of education is a heritage, as it covers knowledge beyond western education. "Consequently, the State would continue to protect and enhance the almajiri system by ensuring the learning covers a wide range of subjects". She also stated that the Government and partners should ensure the society is enlightened to assure of buy-in for improvement in the system. In addition, the



**Commissioner for Children and Women Affairs** appealed for cash transfers to mothers, as well as the increased participation of women in skills for sustenance, as many had become breadwinners on their homes, by default.

The **SUBEB Chair** discussed the Better Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA), a World Bank-funded project supported by UBEC, one of the projects in relation to the almajiri children currently within 'tsangaya' schools. It is important to note, however, that BESDA may not be a good entry point in Sokoto State, as it could only account for 80,000 pupils in the 40,000 tsangaya schools already identified by the State.



The representative of the Ulama's and **Chief Imam, Malam Muhammadu**, commended the State government for taking far reaching steps to curb street begging in the state, especially by almajiri school students. He spoke about the challenges of the youth and children in the system, following a wide range of consultations towards improving the welfare of the older youth, termed the 'Muhajirun'.

In conclusion, the **Directors in the Ministries of Youths & Sports, Health, Scholarship Board & Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture**, shared goodwill messages and assured their full support to engage in whatever capacity they are required to, in the bid to enhance the conditions of the tsangaya system. Other areas considered for possible collaboration and support included the setting up of an Alumni association for the tsangaya schools, engagement with development partners

and partnerships with Jaiz, Taj, and Sterling bank Islamic window for payment and support.

## 7.0 VISIT TO AGRICULTURAL TRAINING CENTER

The Team then visited the Bodinga Agricultural Training Centre, being one among the 3 such facilities in Sokoto State. The Centre is supervised by the College of Agricultural Sciences under the auspices of the Sokoto State Polytechnic. The facility include forestry, an orchard, skills related to livestock rearing, fisheries and poultry. The Manager confirmed that most of the beneficiaries are deployed to the Centre by the Polytechnic on attachment for training, apart from the few interested members from the neighbouring communities who enrol themselves by approaching the management directly.





## 7.0 SESSION CHAIRED BY THE EXECUTIVE GOVERNOR OF SOKOTO:

The next morning, His Excellency the Governor of Sokoto State interacted with the ARC-P team in the Council Chambers, in the presence of the Deputy Governor, the Speaker and members of the State Executive Council. He welcomed the ARC-P team to Sokoto State, confirming his keen interest in the ARC-P approach when Mrs. Uwais first mentioned the project to him, a few months before. As an expression of his interest, he had invited the ARC-P team to Sokoto to witness first-hand the government initiatives and plans for the vulnerable children, including the almajirai.





He further explained the PONDOK Reform Almajiri system was being adopted by Sokoto State, with adjustments as required due to the peculiarities of culture. He went on to say that, “the programme entails training teachers in different trades and skills. After the training, they will go back to their schools and impart the knowledge to their pupils so that they can all be self-reliant and desist from begging.”



He revealed that there will be more than 2,000 almajiri schools in the State to benefit from the modernisation efforts. The Governor said the ARC-P approach was

appealing in that it was clear that the State had to take ownership of the programme, since the children are the responsibility of the State and not the Federal Government.



The Special Adviser gave a summary of the strategy and approach of ARC-P, reiterating that the effort was meant to add value to existing initiatives and not an attempt to create any new project. She thanked the Government for the warm hospitality and the information shared, as well as the very commendable plans by the State Government to modernise the Almajiri system. Even though the pandemic had delayed the commencement of implementation, ARC-P seems to have been introduced at the right time, as the strategy could be integrated into the State plans before commencement. She indicated that the MoU would be shared with the State Government for consideration, which merely set out the roles and responsibilities of Federal & State Governments in implementation.

Following the deliberations, it was agreed that the State government would review the submissions and align the identified needs with the thrust of the ARC-P strategy document, in seeking to enhance the dignity of, and deepen the productivity of youth and children in Sokoto State.



On the MOU, the Governor said the Attorney General of the State would be requested to receive the draft for execution by both Parties. The Governor also mentioned that other vulnerable groups that could benefit from the ARC-P intervention could include the girl-child, alluding to a new Institution for the female gender that was in the pipeline under the auspices of the 'NANA ASMA'U FOUNDATION'. The State had recently established the College of Medical Science Academy, an ICT driven centre of learning in collaboration with South Korean Government, with about 600,000 girls expected to engage in learning in this College.





## 9.0 CONCLUSION

Sokoto State has adopted a robust approach on the issue of Almajiri and other vulnerable children. It is evident that there were several needs available if the State were to embrace the ARC-P intervention, beyond the Almajiri children in the tsangaya schools. Of particular interest, requiring a lot of sensitization, is the education and empowerment of the girl child.



### Recommendations:

- a. Based on the forgoing, it would be safer to use the following facilities to map out tsangaya schools as a pilot camps for ARC-P initiative. They include:
  - Full time local tsangaya schools.
  - The weekend or part time learning centres.
  - The 3 Agricultural training centres.
  - Any other available Vocational Centres.
- b. Coordination: The ARC-P team would need a strong, hands-on Project Lead & Coordinator in Sokoto State that could manage the diverse stakeholders in the State, preferably someone with ready access to the State Governor, to

facilitate progress and ensure all bottlenecks are resolved speedily. This is key in realising the ARC-P goals and successful outcomes in Sokoto State.

- c. Data would need to be collated, to be shared with the Federal team, for monitoring and support.
- d. A distinct ARC-P workplan for Sokoto State is required, that aligns with the Sokoto State plans that has been prepared in furtherance to the PONDOK system, before its roll out.
- e. The ARC-P teams' participation at the proposed Summit is important, to ensure that the desired components of the strategy is factored into the State plans, before commencement.



**Recommendations** include:

- 1) The inclusion of other vulnerable children, such as youth that had engaged in substance abuse, for the ARC-P intervention.
- 2) There should be a concerted focus on the female gender, especially in relation to educating the girl-child and empowering married adolescents, since it was a largely patriarchal society. The specific dimensions of needs should be conveyed to ARC-P by the State team.
- 3) Since the State has already gone some distance with their plans, it is important that the ARC-P team engages with the plans early enough to ensure

comprehensive outcomes, with the ARC-P strategy embedded in the State plans, for sustainability.



COLLEGE OF MEDICAL SCIENCE SOKOTO WORK IN PROGRESS