

Qur'anic Education as a Strategy to Reduce Out-of-School Children in Northern Nigeria: A Feasibility Study

Noel Ihebuzor¹, Jamiu Oluwatoyin Zakariya^{2*}

¹Independent Education Consultant, Abuja, Nigeria

²Independent Education Consultant, Ilorin, Nigeria

Email: *oluwatoyinz@yahoo.co.uk

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Abstract

This study examines whether Qur'anic schools can provide an effective platform for reducing the large population of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Northern Nigeria. Using a qualitative design, we combined a desk review of 2008-2023 policy documents with six purposively selected interviews involving federal policymakers, a multilateral agency representative, and a donor project officer. Documentary sources were screened using explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and reliability. Despite the small sample size, data saturation was reached, and participants offered rich insights into national-level discourses on integration. Findings highlight Qur'anic schools' cultural legitimacy and wide reach, while also underscoring systemic challenges such as weak institutional coordination, inadequate teacher quality, and infrastructural gaps. Illustrative quotes from stakeholders reinforce these themes. Although initiatives such as the Better Education Service Delivery for All (Federal Ministry of Education (FME), 2021)) program report large reintegration figures, we note that these claims are self-reported and lack independent verification. A new limitations subsection acknowledges how COVID-19 constraints and the absence of state- and community-level voices affect transferability. The study concludes that integrating basic literacy and life skills into Qur'anic curricula—paired with stronger institutional collaboration and community ownership—offers a feasible pathway toward reducing OOSC in Nigeria, provided future interventions prioritize sustainability and local buy-in.

Keywords

Qur'anic Schools, Out-of-School Children, Northern Nigeria, Educational Policy, SDG4

1. Introduction

Nigeria faces one of the world's largest education crises, with millions of children excluded from formal schooling. UNESCO (2014) and UNICEF (2015) place the figure of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Nigeria at over 10 million, representing nearly one in five of the global total. This exclusion is most acute in the northern states, where poverty, insecurity, gender inequality, and cultural preferences shape education choices. In these contexts, Qur'anic education remains the dominant form of schooling for boys from poor households, while formal school enrollment lags behind national averages.

The almajiri phenomenon has become central to debates on Nigeria's education system. Almajirai are boys who leave their families, often at a young age, to live with Islamic teachers (mallams) and study the Qur'an. Historically sustained through agricultural labor, Islamic charity (*zakat*), and community contributions, almajiri schools have become increasingly precarious. In urban settings, many students rely on begging or menial work to survive. While parents value the moral and spiritual instruction offered, the absence of literacy, numeracy, and safeguarding mechanisms raises concerns about child welfare and educational quality (Hoechner, 2015; Imam, 1998).

Government and donor agencies classify almajirai as out-of-school, given that they lack access to the core competencies of basic education. This classification mobilizes resources but risks alienating communities who see Qur'anic instruction as legitimate education. Thus, Qur'anic schools occupy a paradoxical position: simultaneously framed as evidence of exclusion and as potential partners for reform.

Efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)—to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”—must grapple with this paradox. Nigeria's Education for All reviews (Federal Ministry of Education, 2017) and donor strategies such as UNICEF's Girls' Education Project (United Nations Children's Fund, 2008), and the World Bank's Better Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA) (World Bank, 2018) have all attempted to address the OOSC challenge. Yet the almajiri system remains under-researched, contested, and politically sensitive.

This article addresses the gap by critically examining the feasibility of using Qur'anic schools as part of Nigeria's OOSC strategy. It draws on documentary analysis and stakeholder interviews to identify both the strengths and challenges of the system, and to propose a hybrid pathway that balances cultural legitimacy with educational access.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Islamic Education in Global Context

Islamic education is a centuries-old tradition present in diverse Muslim societies. In countries such as Senegal, Mali, Kenya, Somalia, and Indonesia, Qur'anic schools have long provided communities with spiritual instruction, moral grounding, and

cultural identity. They often function as low-cost, community-based options where state schooling is weak or absent (Easton et al., 1999).

Donor engagement with Islamic education has been uneven. During the Education for All (EFA) era, religious schools were often cast as obstacles to universal literacy. Under the SDGs, faith-based schools are increasingly acknowledged as partners, though tensions persist between global metrics of quality and local definitions of education. Novelli & Sayed (2016) highlight how donor-driven reforms often emphasize standardized outcomes, while communities prioritize moral and religious knowledge.

Experiences across Africa offer lessons. In Senegal and Mali, donor-funded integration projects attempted to introduce literacy and numeracy into *daara* schools. While modest gains were recorded, resistance emerged from religious leaders who feared secular encroachment (Bano et al., 2011). By contrast, the Madrasa Early Childhood Program in Kenya and Tanzania, supported by the Aga Khan Foundation, succeeded by embedding reforms within community structures and respecting religious priorities (Boyle & Zakariya, 2004). Somalia presents another case where, in the absence of state systems, Qur'anic schools became the backbone of education, though concerns over quality and politicization persisted.

Across these cases, a consistent lesson emerges: reforms succeed when they are culturally legitimate, community-owned, and financially sustainable.

2.2. Islamic Education in Nigeria

Qur'anic education in Northern Nigeria predates colonialism and has remained resilient across centuries. Rooted in the Sokoto Caliphate's traditions, it was once supported by agricultural livelihoods and Islamic charity. Children studied under mallams, who were respected as religious leaders, and the system was integrated into social and economic life (Fafunwa, 1974).

Colonial policies marginalized Qur'anic schools, privileging Western education while undermining indigenous institutions (Doi, 1992). In post-independence Nigeria, Qur'anic schools continued to flourish as low-cost alternatives, particularly for rural households. Today, they enroll millions of children, but largely outside the formal system. Parents choose them for their accessibility and spiritual legitimacy.

However, challenges are pronounced. Many almajirai live in poverty, without adequate housing, nutrition, or protection. Mallams lack formal teacher training, and curricula rarely extend beyond Qur'anic memorization. As Hoechner (2015) observes, while parents see Qur'anic education as morally superior, the children themselves often experience hardship, hunger, and exclusion from social mobility.

2.3. Strengths and Challenges of Qur'anic Schools

Qur'anic schools retain strong community legitimacy. They are **accessible**, even in rural areas where government schools are absent; **affordable**, often charging

minimal or no fees; and **flexible**, with timetables aligned to agricultural cycles (Tomasevski, 2005). Importantly, they reinforce religious identity, which many parents perceive as threatened by secular schooling (Yoloye et al., 1993).

However, persistent challenges undermine their educational effectiveness. These include: 1) The almajiri system, which displaces children and leaves them to fend for themselves in urban centers (Hoechner, 2015); 2) Poor infrastructure and lack of sanitation; 3) Absence of trained teachers and reliance on rote learning (Solomon, 2015); 4) inadequate funding, with most schools dependent on community donations.

This duality underscores the policy dilemma: should Qur'anic schools be integrated into the UBE framework, or left as parallel institutions?

2.4. Integration Efforts in Nigeria

Efforts to bridge Qur'anic and formal education have a long history. Early attempts date to the colonial period, when Muslim communities established hybrid schools to counter Christian missionary dominance (Fafunwa, 1974). Post-independence reforms, notably the **1969 Curriculum Conference** and the **National Policy on Education (1977)**, encouraged integration of Qur'anic schools into the Universal Basic Education (UBE) framework. More recently, donor-supported initiatives have piloted integration models.

- **UNICEF's Girls Education Project (GEP)** (2004-2008) scaled up Integrated Qur'anic Schools in six northern states, boosting enrolment but struggling with sustainability and ownership (United Nations Children's Fund, 2008).
- **USAID's Northern Education Initiative (NEI/NEI+)** sought to integrate literacy and life skills through Non-Formal Learning Centres, though mainstreaming into formal schools remained limited.
- **Better Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA)**, launched in 2018, provided conditional cash transfers and support to Qur'anic schools, claiming to reintegrate 1.4 million OOSC, though verifiable impact remains unclear.

Despite these efforts, integration outcomes have been constrained by inter-agency rivalries (between UBEC, NMEC, SUBEB, SAME), lack of legal frameworks, and weak data collection systems.

2.5. Lessons from Other Contexts

Experiences from Senegal, Guinea, and Niger demonstrate that integration is most effective when it emerges from community engagement rather than external imposition. Easton et al. (1999) documented how Senegalese Qur'anic schools successfully integrated vocational skills, enabling learners to acquire both religious and livelihood competencies. Such models suggest that a culturally rooted, skills-based approach may enhance the acceptability and sustainability of reforms in Northern Nigeria.

2.6. Research Gap

While previous studies document the scope and challenges of Qur'anic education,

few assess its feasibility as a deliberate strategy for reducing OOSC. Existing interventions often prioritize enrolment figures over sustained learning outcomes and rarely conduct impact evaluations. Moreover, institutional rivalries and fragmented policies have impeded coordination. This study addresses these gaps by systematically examining the feasibility of Qur'anic schools as a vehicle for reducing OOSC, drawing on both literature and insights from key stakeholders.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

This study adopted a **qualitative exploratory design**, appropriate for investigating feasibility questions where contextual depth is required (Creswell, 2013). The aim was to examine whether and how Qur'anic schools can be leveraged as vehicles for reducing out-of-school children (OOSC) in Northern Nigeria. By combining documentary analysis with stakeholder interviews, the study sought to capture both historical perspectives and contemporary policy debates.

3.2. Data Sources

Two primary sources of data were employed:

1) Documentary Analysis: Documentary sources were screened according to specific inclusion criteria: a) relevance to Qur'anic/Islamiyya education or out-of-school children (OOSC); b) publication between 2008 and 2023; c) authorship by government ministries, multilateral agencies, or peer-reviewed outlets; and d) availability of verifiable policy or program data. Searches were conducted using Google Scholar with terms such as "Qur'anic/Islamiyyah education", "Northern Nigeria", "Basic Education", and "OOSC", yielding multiple papers, from which the most relevant were selected. Exclusion criteria were applied to omit documents lacking verifiable data or policy focus.

2) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders directly engaged in OOSC and Qur'anic education programming at the federal and international levels.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to identify key informants with specialized knowledge of Qur'anic education and OOSC policy. Six interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants holding national-level policymaking or program oversight responsibilities, including federal agencies, one multilateral representative, and a donor-funded project team member. This sample was considered adequate because these individuals were uniquely positioned to reflect on both state and federal-level education policy and donor engagement with Qur'anic schools. Data saturation was reached when the final two interviews produced no new themes. While the findings do not capture the full diversity of perspectives, they illuminate federal-level policy discourses, which were the primary focus of this feasibility study. Triangulation was also used, where necessary, to verify the accu-

racy of participants' responses. Although the Terms of Reference anticipated engagement with state-level stakeholders, COVID-19 restrictions prevented these interactions.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

Documentary data were compiled through systematic searches of institutional archives and online repositories between March and May 2020. KIIs were conducted using a pre-defined interview guide covering issues such as the status of Qur'anic schools, integration efforts, policy gaps, and feasibility considerations. Owing to COVID-19 lockdown measures, interviews were primarily conducted via telephone, with one conducted via Skype and one focus group discussion held face-to-face with five project team members.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically. Documentary evidence was first coded to extract recurring themes regarding the role of Qur'anic schools, previous interventions, and policy frameworks. Interview transcripts and notes were coded inductively, and emerging themes were triangulated with documentary findings to enhance validity. Convergence and divergence across sources were systematically examined to refine interpretations.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and gave verbal consent to participate. Given the sensitivity of policy discussions and the political nature of Qur'anic education, confidentiality was assured and no names are disclosed beyond institutional affiliations. The researchers acknowledge their positionality as external consultants and took care to minimize bias by triangulating multiple data sources.

3.7. Limitations

This study faced several limitations. Data collection was constrained by COVID-19 restrictions, which prevented broader fieldwork at the state and community levels. As a result, perspectives from state officials, teachers, and parents were not included, limiting the transferability of findings. The purposive federal sample also means that the study reflects national policy discourses more than localized implementation dynamics. Under normal circumstances, we would have included state-level perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Future research should incorporate multi-level perspectives to strengthen generalizability.

4. Findings

4.1. Recognition of Qur'anic Schools as OOSC Institutions

Findings from both documentary analysis and stakeholder interviews confirm

that children enrolled in Qur'anic schools are classified as out-of-school children (OOSC) under Nigeria's education policy. While historically Qur'anic schooling was not regarded as exclusionary, the shift to Roman-script literacy as the official medium of education has entrenched this categorization. Key informants acknowledged the legitimacy of Qur'anic schools as educational spaces but emphasized the need for curriculum expansion to align with basic education standards.

4.2. Strengths of Qur'anic Schools

Qur'anic schools possess several advantages that make them potential vehicles for addressing OOSC as shown in **Table 1** below:

Table 1. Strengths of qur'anic schools in Northern Nigeria.

Strengths	Stakeholder Evidence
Accessibility	Low cost, flexible enrollment
Community legitimacy	Trusted by parents and mallams
Wide reach	Found in rural and urban areas
Cultural continuity	Preserves Islamic identity
Flexibility	No age restrictions for learners

Note. Based on interviews and document analysis.

Parents consistently highlighted that Qur'anic schools are affordable and socially acceptable. Government officials agreed that their wide reach offered an opportunity to address OOSC numbers quickly if reforms could be implemented effectively.

4.3. Challenges and Weaknesses

Despite these strengths, significant barriers constrain the potential of Qur'anic schools as indicated in **Table 2** below:

Table 2. Challenges of qur'anic schools in Northern Nigeria.

Challenges	Stakeholder Evidence
<i>Almajiri System</i>	Children are often displaced, forced to beg, and lack parental care
<i>Teacher quality</i>	Mallams lack formal training
<i>Infrastructure</i>	Poor sanitation, lack of classrooms, absence of boarding facilities.
<i>Funding gaps</i>	Schools depend on community donations, alms, child labor, with minimal government support.
<i>Curriculum gaps</i>	Absence of literacy, numeracy, life skills
<i>Transition pathways</i>	Weak linkage to formal schools
<i>Safeguarding</i>	Exposure to abuse, neglect, hazards
<i>Weak data systems</i>	Absence of reliable statistics on enrolment and outcomes.

Note. Derived from multi-stakeholder perspectives.

“Communities value Qur’anic schools, but without trained facilitators, literacy components cannot be sustained” (Donor Representative, personal communication, March 2021).

Donors emphasized that without addressing teacher training and financing, integration reforms would fail. Mallams feared external control but admitted challenges in sustaining schools without child contributions.

4.4. Stakeholder Perspectives

Key informants from federal agencies and development partners generally concurred that Qur’anic schools could serve as an effective entry point for reducing out-of-school children (OOSC), provided integration with the formal education system is strengthened. Recommended measures included curriculum enrichment, teacher training, and provision of instructional materials. At the same time, respondents emphasized that institutional rivalries—particularly among UBEC, NMEC, SAME, and SUBEB—remain significant barriers to policy coherence. They further stressed that sustainability will depend on community ownership rather than prolonged donor dependence. Specifically:

- **Government officials** regarded Qur’anic schools as indispensable to OOSC reduction but pointed to weak coordination and inadequate resources.
- **Donors** prioritized measurable outcomes such as literacy scores and enrollment, while expressing frustration over political discontinuities.
- **Religious leaders** emphasized autonomy and authenticity, welcoming welfare support but resisting curricular reforms that diminished Qur’anic study.
- **Parents** sought a balanced approach, with religious instruction as the foundation, complemented by basic literacy and numeracy skills.

“Integration policies often remain on paper because coordination across ministries is weak” (Federal policymaker, personal communication, March 2021).

4.5. Feasibility of Qur’anic Schools as an OOSC Strategy

This study concludes that Qur’anic schools represent a feasible platform for reducing out-of-school children (OOSC) in Northern Nigeria, provided that reforms are comprehensive and context-sensitive. Their effectiveness depends on a set of enabling conditions, including (**Table 3**):

- 1) Integration of literacy, numeracy, and life skills into existing curricula;
- 2) Stronger collaboration between federal and state agencies to ensure coordinated delivery;
- 3) Provision of incentives such as school feeding and conditional cash transfers to encourage participation;
- 4) Incorporation of vocational skills to promote livelihoods and reduce reliance on street begging;
- 5) Harmonization of federal and state-level policies;
- 6) Sustainable financing through recurrent budgetary allocations rather than dependence on donor funding;

- 7) Blended teacher development programs that strengthen pedagogy without undermining religious authority;
- 8) Meaningful engagement of parents and mallams in reform design to secure community ownership;
- 9) Safeguarding measures to address children’s housing, nutrition, and health needs.

Table 3. Summary of major integration efforts in Nigeria.

Initiative	Lead Agency	Scope	Achievements	Challenges
UNICEF GEP (2004-2008)	UNICEF, FME	6 states	Enrolment increased, 400+ IQS established	Weak sustainability, limited mainstreaming
USAID NEI/NEI+ (2010-2020)	USAID, SUBEB	Bauchi & Sokoto	1000 NFLCs established; 27,000 learners graduated	Poor mainstreaming, weak state commitment
BESDA (2018-2022)	UBEC	17 states	Reported 1.4 m OOSC reintegrated	Data unverifiable, inter-agency exclusion
UBEC Almajiri Schools (2010-2015)	UBEC	National	157 model schools constructed	Many unused/repurposed, poor ownership

5. Discussion

5.1. Revisiting the OOSC Challenge

Nigeria’s persistent OOSC crisis reflects both supply-side and demand-side barriers to education. On the supply side, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, and weak governance undermine formal schooling. On the demand side, socio-cultural factors—particularly in Northern Nigeria—drive parental preference for Qur’anic education. This study confirms earlier reports (UBEC, 2010) that millions of children counted as OOSC are in fact enrolled in Qur’anic schools. The implication is that the OOSC phenomenon cannot be addressed without engaging the Qur’anic education sector.

5.2. Alignment with Previous Research

The results echo prior studies (Boyle & Zakariya, 2004; United Nations Children’s Fund, 2008; Hoehner, 2015; Solomon, 2015), which documented both the accessibility and legitimacy of Qur’anic schools and their persistent structural deficits. They lend further support to Easton et al. (1999)’s argument that integration is successful when rooted in cultural legitimacy and community involvement rather than externally imposed frameworks. Comparative lessons from Senegal and Mali underscore these findings, demonstrating the shortcomings of donor-led reforms (Bano et al., 2011). Where this study diverges from earlier interventions is in its focus: it moves beyond enrollment statistics to identify the broader conditions—curriculum enrichment, teacher training, incentives, and institutional coordina-

tion—that determine sustainability.

5.3. Policy and Institutional Implications

The findings underscore the fragmented institutional landscape of Qur’anic education in Nigeria. Overlaps and rivalries between UBEC, NMEC, SUBEB, and SAME have hindered integration efforts. This confirms critiques that governance failures, rather than community resistance, often explain the limited success of past interventions (Boyle & Zakariya, 2004). Unless coordination mechanisms are strengthened, future initiatives risk repeating the cycle of duplication and weak ownership. Moreover, the reliance on international development partners has created dependency and undermined sustainability, highlighting the need for stronger state and local government leadership.

5.4. Theoretical Implications

“Parents trust Qur’anic schools because they align with community values, that trust is the entry point for any literacy program” (Policymaker, Personal Communication, April 2021).

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to debates on **faith-based schooling and human capital development**. Qur’anic schools embody the tension between cultural legitimacy and state recognition: while they provide moral formation and community identity, they are marginalized within the human capital framework that defines education in terms of economic productivity. Integrating basic literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills into Qur’anic education offers a pathway to reconciling these competing logics. This aligns with rights-based perspectives that view education as both a social right and a means of empowerment (Tomasevski, 2005).

5.5. Stakeholder Perspectives

- Strong support for **integration** (literacy, numeracy, life skills).
- Recognition of **institutional rivalry** (UBEC, NMEC, SUBEB, SAME).
- Concerns about donor-driven, unsustainable interventions.

5.6. Feasibility Pathways

The central contribution of this study is its articulation of **feasibility pathways** for leveraging Qur’anic schools in reducing OOSC. The findings suggest that feasibility depends on four interrelated conditions:

- 1) **Curriculum integration** that respects religious identity while embedding basic education.
- 2) **Institutional coordination** among federal, state, and local agencies to reduce duplication and rivalry.
- 3) **Community ownership** to ensure sustainability beyond donor cycles.
- 4) **Incentive mechanisms** (feeding, cash transfers, vocational training) to address poverty-related barriers.

These pathways illustrate that Qur'anic schools are not a substitute for formal education but can serve as **complementary entry points** for extending access, particularly in marginalized contexts where state schooling lacks legitimacy.

5.7. Conceptual Framework

Findings suggest that while Qur'anic schools are well positioned to support literacy integration because of their legitimacy and reach, success is undermined by teacher shortages, poor infrastructure, and fragmented institutional frameworks. Integration efforts require holistic support, not piecemeal donor interventions.

Reports such as the Better Education Service Delivery for All ([Federal Ministry of Education \(FME\), 2021](#)) program claim to have reintegrated 1.4 million OOSC, but these figures are self-reported and lack independent verification. This study does not attempt to validate these numbers; rather, it highlights feasibility and the structural processes necessary for sustainable reform ([Figure 1](#)).

FEASIBILITY OF QUR'ANIC SCHOOLS AS A STRATEGY TO REDUCE OOSC

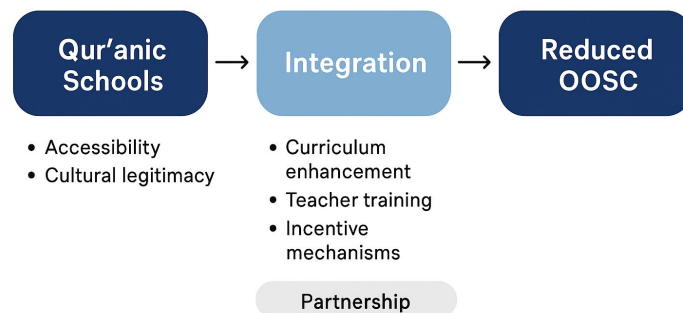


Figure 1. Feasibility pathway for qur'anic schools and OOSC reduction.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the feasibility of leveraging Qur'anic schools as a strategy for reducing the large population of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Northern Nigeria. Drawing on documentary evidence and insights from key stakeholders, the study found that while Qur'anic schools are widely accessible, affordable, and culturally legitimate, they face serious constraints including inadequate infrastructure, weak teacher capacity, and limited integration into the national education framework.

The findings suggest that the OOSC crisis in Nigeria cannot be resolved without engaging Qur'anic education, given its centrality in many communities. However, reform efforts must go beyond short-term enrolment gains and address structural issues of curriculum design, institutional coordination, and sustainability. Qur'anic schools should not be viewed as substitutes for formal schooling but as complementary platforms through which universal access to basic education can be expanded.

By situating Qur'anic schools within broader education reform and develop-

ment agendas, Nigeria can align cultural legitimacy with national and global commitments such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). The study thus contributes to debates on faith-based education, policy integration, and strategies for inclusive education in fragile contexts.

7. Recommendations

1) Curriculum Integration and Reform

- Introduce basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills into Qur'anic school curricula while preserving their religious core.
- Embed vocational and livelihood skills to reduce dependence on street begging.

2) Teacher Professional Development

- Establish structured training and certification programs for Qur'anic teachers (mallams).
- Provide incentives such as stipends or community-based remuneration mechanisms to improve retention.

3) Institutional Coordination

- Harmonize roles among UBEC, NMEC, SUBEB, and SAME to reduce duplication and rivalry.
- Develop a clear legal and policy framework for Qur'anic education within Nigeria's education sector plan.

4) Community Ownership and Participation

- Engage parents, religious leaders, and proprietors in planning and implementation to foster legitimacy.
- Promote locally driven models rather than externally imposed interventions.

5) Incentive Mechanisms

- Scale up school feeding programs, conditional cash transfers, and scholarship schemes targeted at Qur'anic learners.
- Incentivize communities and schools that agree to integrate basic education elements.

6) Data and Monitoring Systems

- Establish reliable data collection systems for enrolment, attendance, and learning outcomes in Qur'anic schools.
- Conduct periodic impact evaluations rather than relying solely on baseline and endline assessments.

7) Sustainability beyond Donor Funding

- Encourage state and local governments to embed Qur'anic education interventions in their education sector plans.
- Foster partnerships with private sector and civil society for long-term resource mobilization.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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