

Change of Perspective Benefits Survivors in Northern Nigeria

Elisha P. Renne, PhD, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, erenne@umich.edu



Babangida riding to school.

Until three years ago, Babangida Al-Laban lived with his parents in a small village east of Zaria in Kaduna State in Northern Nigeria. Although Babangida did not attend school, he learned to read Hausa and knew some arithmetic. It was clear to those who knew him that Babangida was a very bright child.

However, this boy could not walk and his main means of mobility was crawling, wearing pads to protect his knees. His future held little promise.

Then the Al-Laban family moved to Zaria City and Babangida got lucky. A neighboring family (whose son is a polio survivor) arranged for him to take an entrance examination for a nearby junior high school. One year later, Babangida was first in his class. As for mobility, the neighbor's son, Musa Muhammed, located a hand-operated tricycle, and Babangida was on his way.

When he graduates from this school in 2008, Babangida will apply for entrance to one of four secondary schools in Kaduna State that are part of the “Integrating Schools Program,” a special education effort begun in 1998. Here, students receive free room, board, books and travel expenses, all provided through the Kaduna State Ministry of Education.

In the past, people in Northern Nigeria with disabilities, people like Babangida, were left to beg for a living. Now, through a huge shift in perspective, the Nigerian Government, international agencies such as USAID (United States Agency for International Development), and the Kano State and Kaduna State Governments are supporting education and training programs that lead to employment for those with disabilities.

Mallam Mohammed Abbas Aliyu, headmaster of Al Huda Huda School, the secondary school Babangida hopes to attend, says, “More recently the disabled are starting to feel that everyone should be treated as a member of society, who should have the right to go to school.” He explains that making it possible for those with disabilities to attend school may encourage parents to give their children an alternative to begging. These children must complete primary school to the sixth grade in order to qualify for the new program.

“Their ability to attend and complete Primary 6 is a major accomplishment — so that instead of leaving the child to beg, the government says the child should go to school,” says Mr. Ayuba Amwe, Acting Director of Special Education at the Kaduna State Ministry of Education.

Even more opportunities exist today for polio survivors in Northern Nigeria. One of them is the organization of the Kano Polio Victims Trust Association (KPVTA), which offers employment and education for those with disabilities in Kano. Others are Kano’s newly formed business groups, such as the National Disabled Business Association (NDBA), which supports activities such as selling phone cards, mobile phones and accessories.

This group has received a microcredit loan to start poultry and fish farms in addition to the phone operations. A USAID program known as COMPASS (Community Participation for Action in the Social Sector) has provided vocational training and literary classes. The future is changing in Northern Nigeria for many like Babangida. ▲

Renne is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan. Her research on polio in Northern Nigeria has been published in *Social Science & Medicine* and in the *Journal of the International Institute*; a chapter in the edited volume, *Anthropology and Public Health*, is forthcoming.