

Averting the Looming Food Crisis: A Clarion Call to Immediate and Near-term Policy Action

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I. Introduction

Discussions on food security have gained traction in the recent past, especially in Africa and other developing economies. Several horrifying images of famished families, particularly around “*The Horn of Africa*” including Somalia, Ethiopia, and some parts of Kenya, projected globally in both the print and electronic media vividly illustrate the perils of food crises. In Nigeria, food constitute a substantial share of family budgets, particularly for low-income households. When prices of essential foods items increase poorer people suffer the adverse impacts more disproportionately. While clothing and shelter are basic necessities of life, food remains the most vital, given its centrality to human existence. It is a known fact that the quest for food security has shaped human history, provoking wars, driving migration and underpinning the growth of nations. Consequently, to prevent food shortages and surmount deprivation, various international organisations and individual countries have embarked on aggressive crusades that will reduce the likelihood of crisis, remedy unsavoury situations and make food affordable to all

II. Conceptualising Food Security

Food Security has three basic aims: ensuring adequate production and supply of food, maximising stability in the flow of supplies, and ensuring access to available supplies on the part of those who need them. Many definitions of food security exist in the literature, two of which stand out. Eboh (1995) designated food security as the ability of individuals and households (especially the rural and urban poor) to meet staple food needs, all year round. Similarly, Gurkarm (2005) asserted that food security is a state of affairs where all people at all times have access to safe and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.

Food insecurity in a population is typically characterised by the number of hungry or malnourished people, underweight children, and people suffering from

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micronutrient deficiencies. The main threats to food sufficiency in Nigeria include, rising insecurity, population growth, increase in food prices, the disappearance of the variety of agricultural plant species, water scarcity, limited access to land, and food losses and wastes.

Given the identified threats, food crisis can occur when at any point in time it is no longer feasible for people to have access to food or have the means to purchase a sufficient quantity. Currently, the situation seems to be the case in Nigeria. The brewing crisis is, to a certain degree, due to the poor execution of various agricultural strategies. This has brought about decline in crop and livestock output.

Changing climatic conditions affect both the physical and the economic availability of some staple food commodities. Their impacts on income-earning opportunities can affect the ability to buy food, the availability of certain food products, and prices. Changes in the demand for seasonal agricultural labour, caused by changes in production practices have a knock-on effect on income generating capacity. In Nigeria, these conundrums are exacerbated by the reality that most farmers have limited access to credit facilities and an inadequacy of irrigable land.

The crisis in the northern part of Nigeria has forced some crop farmers and pastoralists to abandon their lands and relocate to neighbouring countries like Niger, Chad and Cameroun. In March, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) stated that about 65.0 per cent of northern farmers have migrated southwards because of the insecurity in their homeland. The agency warned that the country would likely face a famine by the end of the year 2022 because of unrelenting threats of terrorist attacks to many small-scale farmers and mechanised farmers in Nigeria's northeast. "The attacks on these farmers who produce beans, onions, pepper, maize, rice, livestock and catfish in the Lake Chad area for the southern states, have forced them to migrate since the Boko Haram insurgency broke out in Borno State in July 2009" (Ololade, 2012 curled from thenationonline).

The apparent inconsistency in government's targeted policy intervention and implementation strategies further compounds the problem of food security. For instance, weaknesses and threats to agricultural development in Nigeria include:

- I. Poor access to credit, technical inputs, machines and farm implements (i.e. fertilizers, seeds, pesticides, tractor, plow, harvesters, among others) by farmers;
- II. Degradation of natural agricultural resources especially soil and water bodies;
- III. Poor infrastructure (i.e. rural roads, water supply, storage facilities and market infrastructure);
- IV. Inconsistent government policies;

- V. Poor budget allocation to the agriculture sector;
- VI. Poor and inadequate irrigation facilities;
- VII. Uncontrolled grazing and livestock migration in some areas; and
- VIII. Poaching and settlement within protected areas and bush fires.

III. The Nigerian Government Responses to Food Security Challenges

An appraisal of the past efforts shows that successive administrations in Nigeria have initiated programmes towards ensuring food sufficiency and accessibility for the populace. These includes: Farm Settlement Scheme; National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP) by Gen. Yakubu Gowon; Operation Feed the Nation by Murtala/Obasanjo administration; River Basin and Rural Development Authority; Green Revolution and World Bank funded Agricultural Development Project (ADP) by Shehu Shagari and Babangida's Directorate for Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI).

Despite these efforts, agriculture has been constrained by numerous challenges like rural-urban migration, wavering policy formulations and implementation, insufficient infrastructural support, poor input distribution system, focus on oil economy; pricing system; over dependence on rain-fed farming; poor capacity utilisation, low investor's confidence; environmental degradation' poor access to funds; corruption and derisory commitment to implementation of agricultural policies.

IV. Recommendations

- ✓ Restructuring of Nigeria along two federating unit: States and Federal Government;
- ✓ States should be empowered to create their local governments for administrative convenience;
- ✓ States in collaboration with the private sector to acquire land for mechanised farming;
- ✓ Establishment of cottage industries along the clusters of major food crop belt to minimise post-harvest loses;
- ✓ Utilisation of technological innovation in irrigation across the country for all year farming;
- ✓ Restoration of zero duty on agricultural machinery and equipment including fishing boats, agro-chemicals as well as pesticides;
- ✓ Deliberate government policy to encourage indigenous manufacture of machineries that will facilitate mechanised farming;
- ✓ Provision of economic and social infrastructure including rural feeder roads, electricity, pipe-borne water to halt rural-urban migration and thereby retain manpower in the farm;

- ✓ States and the local government which are closer to the people will make the desired impact if the critical issue of food security (production/processing, availability, accessibility, affordability and awareness to nutritious food) is vested in them. This requires holistic review of the constitution for governance to be brought closer to the people;
- ✓ Simply put, if the states have firm control over their resources the issue of sustainable infrastructural development which some policymakers do not situate within the context of food security would command greater attention;
- ✓ Youth corp members with the knowledge or degrees in agriculture, food science and technology, agricultural economics and related fields should be posted to rural farm settlements instead of classrooms.

V. Conclusion

Agriculture has remained an important aspect of the Nigerian economy. Viable agricultural programmes and activities are capable of sustaining the food supply and reserves needed for the welfare of the citizens. There is need to mechanise agriculture and move away from the shifting cultivation system that is being practice in most parts of Nigeria. The country will continue to be food insufficient until agriculture is made attractive to the young people. Restructuring of the Nigerian state is not just imperative but an ultimatum if food sufficiency and security is to be guaranteed.

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