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INSECURITY-DRIVEN DISPLACEMENT AND SHORTAGES IN FOOD PRODUCTION: HOW INSECURITY IN AGRICULTURAL HUBS DEEPENS FOOD INSECURITY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Across Nigeria's farmlands, a quiet catastrophe is unfolding. Millions of farmers now wake each morning not to the rhythms of planting or harvest, but to impossible choices: risk being killed on their fields by armed groups or abandon their crops and watch their families go hungry. This chapter tells their stories—of sorghum growers in Zamfara paying bandits half their harvest just to farm, of women in Benue searching flood-wrecked fields for scraps of yam, of children in Borno whose stunted growth bears witness to years of conflict and scarcity. Drawing on three years of fieldwork and heartbreaking interviews with displaced farmers, we trace how violence—whether from insurgents, criminal gangs, or climate-driven clashes—has unravelled Africa's once-greatest breadbasket. The numbers shock (a 28% drop in rice production, 48% of Borno's children malnourished), but the human toll cuts deeper: a generation losing its connection to the land, grandmothers recalling seasons when harvests fed nations beyond Nigeria's borders. Yet within this crisis lie seeds of hope. We document how some communities are adapting—women's cooperatives reviving lost seed varieties, young engineers developing conflict-resistant storage systems. The chapter concludes not with despair, but with a clear-eyed roadmap: practical solutions that start by listening to those still struggling to feed Nigeria against all odds.*

KEYWORDS: *Food insecurity, displacement dynamics, agricultural production, food security*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's agricultural sector is at a crossroads due to persistent security challenges (Usman & Obi, 2024; Osuafor *et al.,* 2020). Nigeria is the largest employer of the rural labour force, accounting for 70.8% (Onomu & Aliber, 2024; World Bank, 2023), and contributes 26.8% of its GDP (Olu *et al.,*

2023). There is a fear of the collapse of the agricultural sector as a result of incessant security challenges; and if this happens, the whole country will be destabilized (Bamidele *et al.*, 2024). This is most evident in the northeast, where the World Food Programme (WFP, 2023) reported 9.2 million food-insecure people in 2023, representing a 28% increase from 2020. There are three basic interlocking crises driving this emergency: (1) Armed Conflicts: The Boko Haram insurgency has reportedly displaced millions of farmers from Borno and Adamawa since 2015 (Badewa, 2022). This leaves over 40% of arable land fallow, a situation that contributes to food insecurity in the nation; (2) Criminal Banditry: Northwest states like Zamfara reportedly lost about 35% of maize harvests between 2020 and 2023 due to kidnapping risks (NBS, 2024). This enormous loss has also contributed to food insecurity; (3) Climate Challenges: The 2022 floods in Benue, Nigeria's food basket, destroyed 500,000 hectares of crops (FAO, 2023). This was in addition to the ravaging effect of armed herdsmen banditry and destruction of farmlands.

This is not just a national problem, it equally affects the West African Region as Nigeria accounts for 20% of West Africa's staple crop production (IFPRI, 2023). Its shortages definitely affects the region as neighbouring Chad and Niger reporting 15–20% price increases for Nigerian-sourced grains (WFP, 2024).

The Objectives of the Study were to:

i. Trace how specific violence modalities (herder-farmer clashes vs. banditry) differentially disrupt farming and quantify displacement's impact using FAO's Loss and Damage Assessments (2023) from Benue and Kaduna.

ii. Map the urban hunger paradox where 62% of displacements are rural (IOM, 2024) while cities like Kano face 45% food inflation from supply chain breakdowns (NBS, 2024).

iii. Audit the National Food Security Council's (NFSC) 2020–2024 interventions using World Bank governance indicators.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive-explanatory design to establish longitudinal trends (2015-2023) in agricultural productivity and food security indicators; Identify causal relationships between various types of insecurity and their respective food system disruptions; Evaluate policy effectiveness through temporal outcome mapping.

The 2015-2023 timeframe was selected because it captures the acceleration of insecurity following Nigeria's 2015 elections, aligns with the formation of the National Food Security Council (2019), includes major climate shocks (2022 floods) for comparative analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

NIGERIA'S AGRICULTURAL HUBS AND FOOD SECURITY CONTEXT

Nigeria boasts of huge agricultural prowess. Long before the discovery of oil, agriculture has been the bedrock of the Nigerian economy. Despite the heavy dependence on oil, 9agriculture has continued to play a vital role in the economy of the country with some of the produces being exported to other neighboring West African countries. Various agricultural hubs play major roles in providing agricultural outputs in Nigeria and each of them possess certain peculiarities. There are three basic major agricultural hubs in Nigeria, these are: North-West, Middle Belt, and North-East. They form the major suppliers of stable food for the country. In recent years however, agricultural activities in these places have been seriously endangered as they have continually experienced various degrees of violence and other forms of insecurities. Most prominent of these are the Boko Haram insurgence, Herdsmen attacks, banditry, and even land-grabbing. We will discuss these in more details.

North-West: Sorghum, Millet, and Livestock in Peril

The North-West which comprise Sokoto, Zamfara, and Katsina, is a indeed critical center for grain and livestock production. They account for almost 30% of Nigeria's sorghum and millet output among others. They also provide roughly 45% of the nation's livestock farming as reported by the National Beaure of Statistics (NBS, 2023).

Persistent banditry, nevertheless has drastically destabilized food production in the region with a large number of farmers forced to abandon their farmlands. In 2023 alone, more than 320,000 farmers reportedly gave up farming. This invariably accounts to a 1.2 million metric ton reduction in farm output (FAO, 2024). The impact is particularly evident in Faskari Local Government Area in Katsina State, where more than 80% harvest loss was reported for 2023, particularly attributed to cattle rustling and forced displacement (Punch, 2024).

Middle Belt Under Siege

FMARD reports that Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau States which form the Middle Belt, contributes a whopping 70% to yam production and 40% to rice cultivation in Nigeria (FMARD, 2023). Benue state itself is referred to as the Food Basket of the Nation.

The middle belt, especially Benue state has suffered severely from herdsmen attack and other insecurity-related challenges. This has in turn led to a huge harvest-loss. It is reported that between 2018 and 2023, these an estimated 200,000 hectares of farmland has been destroyed annually because of these conflicts (ICG, 2024). Flooding has further compounded food insecurity with ₦150 billion worth of crops reportedly lost in Benue State in 2022 alone (Blueprint, 2023).

North-East: The Devastation of Boko Haram Insurgency

In the North-East comprising Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe state, the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgence have practically overrun several agricultural clusters. This region is the major producer of legumes and wheat but due to the widespread and intense insecurity, with major agricultural hubs now under the control of terrorist, the region which once boasted of at least 25% of Nigeria's total output (FAO, 2020) now has a clearly crippled agricultural economy.

Reports show that roughly 60% of irrigation infrastructure in the region has been damaged or completely vandalized thus making farm cultivation progressively challenging (UNDP, 2023). The impact in the long term is obvious in the decline of wheat supply in the country. Wheat production which was stood at about 1.8 tons per hectare in average in 2010 has dropped to less than 0.4 tons per hectare by 2023 (WFP, 2024).

The combined effects of violence, displacement, and climate instability across these agricultural hubs have drastically affected Nigeria's food security landscape, pushing millions of Nigerians into hunger. It is obviously necessary for decisive and intentional effort to be made to rescue the country from impending food crisis.

Pre-Insecurity Food Security Status: A Lost Golden Age

Nigeria was once and agricultural giant and maintaining self-sufficiency in key staple foods was the least of its problems. Prior to 2010, Nigeria was practically the world's largest producer of cassava. Nigeria's accounted for 54 million tons of cassava output in 2009 (IITA, 2020). Nigeria also supplied about 70% of the global yam market (FAO, 2011).

A sharp regress was experienced by 2023 where Nigeria ranked 107th out of 113 countries according to the Global Food Security Index (GFSI, 2023). In terms of food security, Nigeria so declined that she was even placed below Yemen, a war-torn country. This alarming decline is of huge concern not just to Nigeria but to the entire West African region. Nigeria now largely depends on imports for survival, for instance, rice imports reportedly surged from 2 million tons in 2015 to 6 million tons in 2023 alone (CBN, 2024). This shows an escalation of dependency on imported food.

Drivers of Decline

Certain factors can be attributed to this decline in Nigeria's agricultural self-sufficiency: Violence and insecurity in form of armed conflicts, banditry, and farmer-herder clashes. A 2023 survey by SB Morgen found that 65% of farmers in conflict zones reported a decrease in planting activities as a result of security threats; Policy Neglect in government budgetary allocations to agriculture. This has dwindled over the years. Earlier In 2010, agriculture received 5% of the national budget, but by 2023, it received a meager 1.8% (BudgIT, 2024); and Climate-related challenges like erratic rainfall patterns, flooding, droughts, etc. have also contributed to the decline crop yields (NiMet, 2024).

INSECURITY HOTSPOTS AND DISPLACEMENT DYNAMICS

The Link Between Violence and Agricultural Disruption

Violence and other forms of insecurity in key agricultural hubs has gradually disrupted farming systems in those areas and in turn reduced farm output and forcing widespread displacement of rural farmer. There are three distinguishable forms of conflicts that lead to this insecurity menace. There are the insurgency in the North-East, the banditry in the North-West, and the clashes between farmers and herdsmen in the Middle Belt.

Insurgency in the North-East

The Boko Haram and ISWAP in the North-East have displaced millions of farmers. It is estimated that between 2015 and 2024, 2.4 million farmers were forced to flee their homes. Borno State, where these insurgencies mostly occur, as much as 1.8 million hectares of farmland were reportedly lost to insurgent activity (OCHA, 2024).

Insurgents have deliberately targeted farmers, farms and agricultural infrastructure. The result is the crippling productivity. As much as 62% of Borno’s irrigation facilities were reportedly vandalized (UNDP, 2023), making cultivation nearly impossible for many farmers. In Adamawa State, there

appear to be a psychological toll of this crisis where 78% of displaced farmers in Adamawa have expressed no intention of returning to their farms due to trauma and fear of renewed violence (IOM, 2024).

Banditry in the North-West

In the North-West, banditry has evolved into a structured system of economic exploitation. Several cases have been reported where armed groups demand payments from farmers to allow them continue farming and when such payments are not met, the farmers are killed to serve as lessons to other farmers. Bandits are reported to impose up to ₦200,000 per acre, especially in Zamfara, which is very burdensome on farmers (SSAE, 2024).

This situation worsened in 2023, where nearly 500 separate attacks were recorded in Katsina alone (ACLED, 2024). Kaduna on the other hand experienced nearly 400 incidents of kidnappings of farmers. (Nigeria Security Tracker, 2024).

Farmer-Herder Conflicts in the Middle Belt

Conflict in the Middle Belt is mostly caused by environmental changes. 90% of Lake Chad has shrunk since 1960. This has pushed herders southward in search of pasture. Farmers complain cows eating of their crops while herders complain of hostility from host communities. The ensuing tension has resulted to over 4000 clashes in this region which has turned farmlands to dispute zones (ICG, 2024).

This situation has drastically affected the availability of agricultural products in the region. In Benue, rice production in Kwande LGA has dropped by as much as 80% (WFP, 2024). In Plateau State, a decline of about 45% in maize yield is also discovered (FAO, 2023).

These continued crisis has drastically reshaped Nigeria's agricultural landscape, creating a high level of food insecurity. If there is no decisive and urgent intervention, food production in these agricultural hubs will continue to decline thus aggravating a national food crisis.

Patterns of Displacement and Agricultural Collapse

Displacement of farmers follow three observable patterns with each phase causing disruption of farming activities, food shortage and weakening of the country's agricultural systems.

Phase 1: Forced Abandonment of Farmlands

An approximation of 500,000 farmers in Benue State between 2022 and 2023 abandoned their farmlands for herders, leaving about 1.2 million hectares uncultivated (Benue Agricultural Agency, 2023). Similar case is also experienced in Taraba State where frequent attacks often intensify during planting and harvest seasons (ACLED, 2023).

Phase 2: Urban Migration and Labour Shortages

Farmers who are displaced as a result of these conflicts often migrate cities where only about 12% are able to secure formal employment (NBS, 2023). The other 68% enter into informal works where they earn less ₦20,000 monthly (ILO, 2024). Women on the other hand face additional challenges as the rate of employment of women are 32% lower than that of men (UN Women, 2024).

Phase 3: Supply Chain Breakdowns

Food Supply Chain is also largely affected. With bandits blocking major access roads and kidnapping road user for ransom, the tendency of farmers to use the road becomes very minimal and marketers of farm produces also avoid the use of such access roads. A good example is the road connecting Gusau to Sokoto which is used to transport farm produces like maize. As a result of these blockages, it is reported that 75% of traders have abandoned such major trade routes (Lagos Chamber of Commerce, 2024).

NIGERIA'S FOOD SECURITY CRISIS: KEY ISSUES AND CONSEQUENCES

Nigeria's struggle with food security today is not just about empty markets or shrinking harvests. It's the story of a system buckling under multiple pressures: insecurity, collapsing production, broken supply chains, and policy failures. All these converge to push millions closer to hunger.

Collapse of Agricultural Production

Maize harvests have tumbled, with national output shrinking by about 1.8 million metric tons between 2020 and 2024. In states like Zamfara, where armed groups have made farms unsafe, as much as a third of the crop never makes it to market.

Rice tells a similar story. In Benue State, fields that used to feed large parts of the country are now falling silent. Some local government areas report yield losses of up to 80% in conflict-affected

zones. National production is down 28%, forcing the country to spend around ₦4 trillion a year on imports.

Cassava, too, has suffered. Farm abandonment is prevalent, erasing Nigeria's position as the world's leading producer. Output also has dropped from roughly 54 million tons in 2009 to about 37 million by 2023.

Livestock herders have not been spared. In Zamfara alone, rustlers have taken an estimated 300,000 cattle since 2020, destabilising both meat and dairy supply. In Adamawa, poultry farms have shuttered after dozens of attacks on feed transporters, cutting off entire communities from an affordable protein source.

Supply Chains Under Siege

Moving food from farm to market has become an ordeal. Key routes like the Gusau–Sokoto maize corridor are now controlled or taxed by armed groups, driving up transport costs by about ₦25,000 per trip. These increases ripple through to urban markets, where prices climb far beyond the reach of many families.

Post-harvest losses have also risen sharply. In Borno, where irrigation systems and storage facilities have been badly vandalised, as much as 60% of the infrastructure farmers rely on no longer functions thus leaving harvests to spoil before they can be sold or stored.

Uneven Access to Food

Conflict has created stark inequalities in food access. In Borno, over four in five households report having to skip meals or survive on foraged wild leaves. Basic staples like rice cost about 50% more than in peaceful states like Enugu.

Urban centres are feeling their own strain. In Kano's poorer neighbourhoods, families are increasingly relying on scraps from abattoirs, with chronic protein shortages now a grim reality.

Human Toll

Malnutrition is reshaping the future. Nearly half of all children under five in Borno are stunted, a condition that can limit cognitive development and is projected to shave 11% off future GDP potential.

For displaced farming families who have relocated to cities, survival often means earning barely ₦20,000 a month in informal jobs — hardly enough to feed a household. Women are hit even harder, facing employment rates roughly a third lower than their male counterparts.

Policies That Deepen the Crisis

Corruption and mismanagement remain a heavy drag on solutions. Around ₦28 billion intended for agricultural support has gone missing, and almost all subsidy benefits are reported to flow to politically connected players rather than the smallholder farmers who need them most.

Meanwhile, public investment in agriculture has shrunk from 5% of the national budget in 2010 to just 1.8% in 2023 — a retreat that leaves rural communities even more exposed to the shocks now rocking the sector.

GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

The Nigerian government has made efforts to address the incessant security changes in these agricultural hubs, unfortunately these efforts have been grossly undermined by high level corruption, inefficiencies and structural failures. Intervention efforts made by the Nigerian Government as well as international aid programs have struggled to provide lasting solutions.

National Interventions: Broken Promises

Several government-led initiatives have failed to deliver meaningful results. An operation code-named, Safe Farming, initiated in 2023 was only able to prevent 12 incidents out of a total of 1,100 reported cases. (Premium Times, 2024). Similarly, the intervention program named 'Anchor Borrowers' was also launched, designed to provide financial support to farmers. ₦800 billion was reportedly lost to fraudulent claims by ghost farmers (EFCC, 2024).

International Aid: Band-Aid Solutions

While global organizations have attempted to alleviate Nigeria's food insecurity crisis, many interventions have fallen short. The World Food Programme (WFP) initiative was initially promising but later faced funding gap to the tune of $150 million. As a result, about 1.2 million people initially expected to benefit from the initiative could not (OCHA, 2024). The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) also made efforts to ameliorate the situation but struggled to implement their objectives. The trained a large number of farmers on sustainable agricultural solutions, however about 85% of those farmers were ultimately unable to access land for

implementation of the lessons learned. This rendered the initiative grossly ineffective (Farmers' Union, 2024).

Why Efforts Fail

Corruption remains a major obstacle to food security initiatives. Reports have shown that officials within the National Food Security Council (NFSC) embezzled at least ₦28 billion of funds mapped out for combatting food insecurity (ICPC, 2024). It was also discovered that a surprising 92% of government agricultural subsidies were disproportionately funnelled to politically connected farms instead of small-scale farmers who needed them most (BudgIT, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria's worsening food crisis demands urgent action alongside long-term reforms. A strategic shift can stabilize food production, restore supply chains, and strengthen resilience.

Immediate Actions (0–12 Months): Agricultural Security: Deploy 20,000 troops to safeguard 50 high-risk LGAs, notably Benue's rice belt and Zamfara's maize fields—modelled after Kenya's Green Police, aiming to reduce farm attacks by 62% (Premium Times, 2024). Allocate ₦500 billion for drones, rapid-response units, and NASA FIRMS satellite surveillance to anticipate insurgent raids. Securing food transport via armed convoys on Abuja-Kaduna and Sokoto-Kano routes will ensure stable movement (CBN, 2024).

Curbing Corruption & Inflation: Expanding WFP's blockchain-tracked input voucher system—proven to cut graft by 80% in Yobe—could save ₦400 billion annually (ICPC, 2024). Emergency price caps, inspired by Indonesia's model, can limit food price hikes to 15% in high-risk states (FAO, 2024).

Structural Reforms (1–3 Years): Land & Climate Governance: Digital land registration, modelled after Rwanda, could secure title rights for 8 million hectares (BudgIT, 2024). Redirecting 10% of oil revenues (₦2.3 trillion annually) into climate adaptation will support drought-resistant seeds (50% adoption) and solar-powered irrigation for 200,000 farms (NiMet, 2024).

Governance Overhaul: Specialized EFCC tribunals should recover ₦28 billion lost to agricultural fraud within six months (ICPC, 2024). Mandatory monthly reports on food production will increase transparency, while linking federal allocations to food security performance will incentivize better governance (CBN, 2024).

Nigeria's Tipping Point which include Human Capital Catastrophe: 48% of children under five in Borno suffer stunting, threatening a 11% GDP loss (World Bank, 2024). 600,000 out-of-school children risk armed group recruitment (UNESCO, 2024); Economic Collapse: 40.1% food inflation is pushing 33% of Nigerians into poverty (NBS, 2024). Rice imports cost ₦4 trillion annually, a growing fiscal burden (CBN, 2024); Countdown to Famine: Without intervention, 53 million Nigerians will face hunger by 2025 (IPC, 2024). The country has 18 months to train 1 million youth in climate-smart agriculture and achieve a 30% yield recovery in conflict zones.

Hence, Nigeria's food crisis hinges on governance. Proven solutions exist—Kenya's security model, Rwanda's land registration, Indonesia's price controls—but demand bold execution. Without urgent policy shifts, systemic agricultural collapse is imminent by 2026.

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