THE POLITICS OF FOOD SECURITY IN NIGERIA AS A KEY DRIVER OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

Food security in Nigeria has become a precarious political and social issue, interwoven with socioeconomic inequalities and political decisions. The politics of food security in Nigeria directly impacts social change. This paper explores the politics of food security in Nigeria as a key driver of social change. With over 70% of the population living in food insecurity, the role of political instability, government policies, and economic challenges cannot be overlooked. Additionally, malnutrition remains prevalent, particularly in vulnerable groups such as children and internally displaced persons (IDPs), exacerbated by inefficient governance and inadequate agricultural policies. The paper examines how political elites use food security as a tool for political leverage, resulting in a fragmented approach to addressing the underlying causes of hunger. The paper applies theoretical lenses such as Political Economy and Social Change Theory to explore these dynamics in detail. The study concludes that unless food security is treated as a national priority, social inequalities and poverty will continue to rise, preventing the achievement of social change in Nigeria.

Key words: Food, Key Driver, Politics, Security, Social Change

Introduction

Nigeria, despite its agricultural potential, grapples with persistent food insecurity, a crisis that threatens the livelihoods of millions. This complex issue is deeply intertwined with the nation's political dynamics, as government policies, governance structures, and resource allocation significantly impact food availability and access. Political instability, corruption, and socio-economic inequalities have exacerbated the problem, leading to widespread malnutrition and hunger (Oladipo & Oyinloye, 2022). The politics of food security is not just about food production; it is intertwined with power dynamics, economic policies, and social structures that either exacerbate or alleviate food shortages. Understanding how these factors influence each other is essential to addressing Nigeria's ongoing food crisis. Food insecurity in Nigeria is a paradox. Despite the country's vast agricultural potential, it continues to suffer from chronic food shortages. As of 2023, over 25 million Nigerians are at risk of food insecurity, a figure that reflects both the failure of agricultural policies and the broader political and economic instability in the country (UNICEF, 2023). These shortages are not simply the result of natural disasters or

poor agricultural practices but are deeply rooted in political mismanagement, corruption, and inequality. As many scholars argue, food security is as much about politics as it is about agriculture (Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 1998). In Nigeria, political decisions about land use, resource distribution, and agricultural funding directly impact food availability and accessibility, disproportionately affecting rural communities and the urban poor (Olaiya, 2020).

The political economy of Nigeria's food security is deeply knotted with its post-colonial history. After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria embarked on various agricultural policies aimed at self-sufficiency. However, these efforts were often derailed by political instability, corruption, and poor governance. For instance, the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) introduced in the 1980s, under the guidance of international organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), prioritized market liberalization over food subsidies, pushing millions of Nigerians into deeper poverty (Olukoshi, 2019). SAP's emphasis on cash crop exports, rather than local food production: meant that the country became increasingly reliant on food imports, further entrenching its vulnerability to global market fluctuations. Food insecurity is not just a matter of insufficient food production; it is a result of how resources are distributed and controlled. Political elites often control access to fertile land, subsidies, and agricultural inputs, sidelining small-scale farmers who make up the majority of Nigeria's agricultural workforce (Amanza, Mailumo, & Silong, 2021; Ayinde, Jijji, & Agbiboa, 2022). These power dynamics are worsened by corruption; funds meant for rural development and agricultural enhancement are most times often siphoned off by powerful political actors. As a result, policies intended to address food insecurity rarely reach those who need them most. Moreover, the political nature of food security in Nigeria extends to its role in shaping social change. The agricultural sector employs over 70% of Nigeria's population, and fluctuations in food availability have a profound impact on social organization and economic mobility (FAO, 2022). Food shortages in rural areas often lead to mass migrations to urban centers, where opportunities for employment are scarce, exacerbating poverty and social unrest. The Boko Haram insurgency, which has ravaged northeastern Nigeria for over a decade, is often linked to the region's chronic food insecurity, as unemployed and disenfranchised youth are drawn into militant groups that promise food and income (Onuoha, 2022).

Political instability also contributes to food insecurity by disrupting agricultural production and distribution networks. Conflicts over land, especially in the Middle Belt region, have led to violent clashes between herders and farmers, further reducing food production in key agricultural zones (Okeke & Nnamani, 2023). Government responses to these crises have been insufficient, often characterized by weak enforcement of land rights and a lack of investment in conflict resolution. These conflicts not only affect food production but also deepen ethnic and religious divides, fueling further social instability. Food or the lack thereof, is a key driver of social change in Nigeria. In rural areas, food scarcity pushes families to migrate in search of better opportunities, either within the country or internationally. This has led to the rapid urbanization of cities like Lagos and Abuja, which struggle to provide adequate services for their growing populations. The social fabric of rural communities is also transformed, as younger generations abandon farming in favor of more stable, albeit low-paying, work in urban centers. This shift has long-term implications for Nigeria's agricultural sector, as the country becomes increasingly dependent on food imports to meet the needs of its growing population (Ayiti & Adedokun, 2023).

On a global scale, Nigeria's food security crisis has political ramifications. The country's reliance on food imports leaves it vulnerable to fluctuations in global food prices (Ojo, 2023),

making it harder for local populations to access affordable food. This, in turn, places pressure on the Nigerian government to engage in international negotiations and seek food aid, which often comes with political strings attached. For example, food aid from Western nations is frequently tied to neoliberal economic reforms that prioritize market liberalization over social welfare, further entrenching inequalities within Nigeria's food system. More worrisome is that Nigeria's food security legislative framework remains inadequate, particularly in regulating and managing international development aid. Despite numerous interventions from international bodies and donor agencies, there is a significant lack of coordination and harmonization between these external efforts and Nigeria's domestic food security needs. This legislative gap allows development aid to be deployed without adequate oversight, leading to fragmented interventions that often fail to address the root causes of food insecurity. However, funds meant for agricultural enhancement and nutritional programs are sometimes misallocated or mismanaged due to the absence of strict regulatory guidelines. Therefore, the politics of food security in Nigeria is a multidimensional issue that incorporates everything from local power struggles to international relations. It is clear that achieving food security requires not only addressing agricultural production but also tackling the political inequalities and governance failures that perpetuate food scarcity. Social change in Nigeria is intrinsically linked to food security, as shifts in agricultural policies, migration patterns, and urbanization shape the country's future. This paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the political dimensions of food security, which is essential for creating policies that promote both food access and equitable social transformation.

Food Security

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2022) defines food security as a condition where "all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." Food security is not just about food availability but also access, utilization, and stability over time. In Nigerian context, food security is heavily influenced by factors such as political instability, economic disparities, environmental challenges, and infrastructural deficiencies. For instance, the ongoing insurgencies in the northeast and farmer-herder conflicts in central Nigeria have severely disrupted food production and distribution (Onuoha, 2022). Even in regions where food is available, access to it can be restricted by poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and inflated prices due to market volatility. According to a UNICEF report, only 18% of Nigerian children between the ages of 6 to 23 months are fed the minimum acceptable diet, while 45% of deaths among under-five year's old children are linked to malnutrition (UNICEF, 2023).

These alarming statistics underscore the critical need for a deeper understanding of food security in Nigeria and how political factors contribute to its current state. Food security is generally divided into four dimensions:

1. Availability: Refers to the supply of food through production, distribution, and exchange.
2. Access: Involves the ability to obtain sufficient resources (both economic and physical) to acquire appropriate food for a nutritious diet.
3. Utilization: This centers the appropriate use of food based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care, as well as access to adequate water and sanitation.
4. Stability: Refers to the ability to obtain food over time, without significant fluctuations due to economic, environmental, or political factors.

Each of these dimensions is relevant to Nigeria, where periodic food shortages are common due to poor agricultural practices, climate change, and fluctuating food prices.

Politics of Food Security

The politics of food security refers to the political processes and power dynamics that shape how food is produced, distributed, and accessed within a society. Food security is not just an agricultural issue; it is a deeply political one. Governments, international organizations, corporations, and local communities play critical roles in determining who gets access to food and how resources are being allocated. In Nigeria, the politics of food security is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internally, political elites often control agricultural policies and funding, creating inequalities in how resources are distributed. Corruption in government agricultural programs frequently diverts funds intended for smallholder farmers, leaving them without the necessary inputs to increase food production (Ayinde et al., 2022). Moreover, land ownership is often concentrated in the hands of political elites, with small-scale farmers having limited access to fertile land, further aggravating food insecurity (Amanza et al., 2021).

Externally, Nigeria's reliance on imported food makes it vulnerable to global market fluctuations and political pressures from foreign governments and international organizations. For example, trade policies imposed by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other bodies often favour export-oriented agriculture over subsistence farming, pushing Nigeria to prioritize cash crops at the expense of food crops (Olukoshi, 2019). This dynamic not only perpetuates food insecurity but also reinforces dependency on foreign food supplies.

Social Change

Social change refers to the transformation of cultural, social, and economic structures over time. In the context of Nigeria, food security or the lack there of acts as a catalyst for significant social changes, influencing migration patterns, employment structures, and social relations. For example, food scarcity in rural areas has led to mass migrations to urban centers in search of better opportunities. This has resulted in rapid urbanization, with cities like Lagos experiencing an influx of rural migrants seeking employment outside of agriculture (Iruonagbe, 2019).

Additionally, food insecurity exacerbates existing social inequalities. Marginalized groups, such as women, children, and rural farmers, are disproportionately affected by food shortages and malnutrition. In many cases, women are responsible for managing household food resources, and when food becomes scarce, they bear the brunt of ensuring that their families have enough to eat. This dynamic often leads to changes in gender roles and family structures, as women take on additional responsibilities or seek employment outside the home to supplement their family's food supply (FAO, 2022).

Moreover, food insecurity can lead to social unrest. In Nigeria, food scarcity has been linked to various forms of social instability, including protests, violent conflicts, and the rise of insurgent groups. The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria, for example, has been partly fueled by the region's chronic food insecurity, which has left large portions of the population impoverished and disenfranchised (Onuoha, 2022).

Thus, the politics of food security is not only about controlling resources but also about shaping social structures. As food security crises intensify, they drive changes in how Nigerian society is organized, from migration and urbanization to shifts in gender roles and family dynamics.

Socio-economic Impacts of Food Security on Vulnerable Populations

Food security, or the lack thereof, profoundly affects vulnerable populations in Nigeria, particularly rural farmers, women, children, and internally displaced persons (IDPs). These groups face systemic challenges that exacerbate poverty, malnutrition, gender inequality, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

Impact on Rural Farmers

Rural farmers are the backbone of Nigeria's agriculture, yet they are among the most food-insecure groups. Over 70% of Nigeria's rural population depends on agriculture for their livelihood, but factors like poor infrastructure, lack of access to credit and inputs, environmental degradation, and political instability limit their productivity (Ajetunmobi, 2024). One of the key challenges is access to limited market. Poor transportation makes it difficult for farmers to sell their produce at profitable urban markets. Consequently, they are forced to sell locally at lower prices, reducing their income and worsening food insecurity (Ajetunmobi, 2024). Inadequate storage facilities also lead to significant post-harvest losses, further eroding their earnings (FAO, 2022). Access to essential agricultural inputs like seeds and fertilizers is also another challenge. Government subsidy programs meant to provide these inputs are often riddled with corruption and inefficiency, leaving farmers without resources to improve yields (World Bank, 2023). Moreover, environmental issues like desertification and erratic weather patterns due to climate change, especially in northern Nigeria, disrupt farming seasons, thereby worsening the food crisis (Nwafor et al., 2021).

Impact on Women

Women play a crucial role in food production and management but face unique barriers that heighten their vulnerability to food insecurity. Many are responsible for growing and preparing food, especially in rural areas, yet they are disadvantaged due to limited access to land, credit, education, and agricultural inputs (FAO, 2022). In many parts of Nigeria, patriarchal land tenure systems prevent women from owning land, leaving them dependent on male relatives. This lack of ownership limits their access to credit and decision-making power in agriculture (Ajetunmobi, 2024). Without land as collateral, women struggle to secure loans for purchasing inputs or expanding their operations (World Bank, 2023). Moreover, women often lack access to education and agricultural extension services compared to men, preventing them from adopting modern farming techniques that could improve their productivity. This knowledge gap further disadvantages women farmers in terms of income and market access. Malnutrition also disproportionately affects women, as they often prioritize feeding their children and families over themselves, leading to higher rates of malnutrition, particularly among pregnant and breastfeeding women (FAO, 2022).

Impact on Children

Children are highly vulnerable to the impacts of food insecurity in Nigeria, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. Malnutrition, stunting, and wasting are common, with 17 million Nigerian children undernourished, many of whom suffer from stunting (UNICEF, 2023). Stunting, which results from chronic malnutrition, has severe long-term effects on cognitive development and overall health, limiting children's potential to escape poverty (UNICEF, 2023). Food insecurity also affects children's access to education. In rural areas, many children are pulled out of school to help their families with farming or income-generating activities. Malnutrition further hinders their ability to perform well in school, perpetuating cycles of poverty and food insecurity (UNICEF, 2023).

Impact on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

IDPs, particularly those displaced by conflict in the northeast, are among the most food-insecure populations in Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency has displaced millions, forcing many IDPs into overcrowded camps with limited access to food, water, and healthcare. These conditions exacerbate their vulnerability to food insecurity and malnutrition (WFP, 2022).

International Relations and Food Aid

Nigeria's food security is influenced by both internal factors and international interactions. Global market forces, international organizations, foreign aid, and trade agreements play crucial roles. This section examines how international relations shape Nigeria's food security, focusing on global trade, food aid, and the implications of foreign assistance.

Global Market Forces and Nigeria's Dependence on Food Imports

Despite its agricultural potential, Nigeria relies heavily on food imports to meet its population's needs. Key staples like rice, wheat, and fish are imported, making Nigeria vulnerable to global food price fluctuations. This reliance exposes the country to external shocks such as market volatility, trade disruptions, and inflation (Akinyele, 2009; Olomola, 2015). The 2007-2008 global food crises exemplify how international market forces can disrupt Nigeria's food security. During this period, global food prices soared due to rising oil prices, biofuel demand, and extreme weather events, leading to increased prices of imported staples in Nigeria (FAO, 2009). This crisis exacerbated food insecurity and sparked protests as citizens struggled to afford basic food items (Akinyele, 2019). World Trade Organization (WTO) which is one of the trade agreements organization in the world also impact Nigeria's food security. This organization reduce tariffs on imports, they can also undermine local food production by making it difficult for Nigerian farmers to compete with cheaper imported goods (Olomola, 2015). This dynamic threatens Nigeria's food sovereignty and increases dependence on external sources (Akinyele, 2019).

The Role of International Food Aid

International food aid significantly addresses Nigeria's food security challenges, especially in conflict-affected regions like the northeast, where the Boko Haram insurgency has displaced millions. Organizations such as the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provide emergency food assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other vulnerable populations (UNICEF, 2023; WFP, 2022). In the northeast, food aid is crucial for meeting the immediate needs of IDPs who have lost their livelihoods due to conflict. Many of these individuals were formerly farmers now unable to access their land or produce food. Food aid helps prevent famine and reduces malnutrition among displaced populations. For example, the WFP distributes food rations and nutritional supplements to IDPs, particularly women and children, who are most vulnerable to malnutrition (WFP, 2022). However, international food aid can also have political and economic implications. Sometimes, food aid is tied to foreign policy objectives or trade agreements, creating a complex web of political interests. Conditions attached to food aid may require Nigeria to implement economic reforms, such as trade liberalization, which can conflict with domestic interests or long-term development goals (IMF, 2023).

Bilateral Relations and Food Security

Nigeria's bilateral relations significantly impact its food security. Key trade partners like India, Thailand, and the United States supply essential staples such as rice and wheat (IMF, 2023). These relationships ensure a steady food supply but also pose risks. For instance, Nigeria's 2019

border closure with Benin and Niger to curb smuggling led to increased food prices and shortages (UNICEF, 2023).

Regional trade agreements, such as Economic Community of West African States and African Continental Free Trade Area aim to reduce tariffs and promote intra-African trade, potentially boosting Nigeria's agricultural exports (USAID, 2024). However, these agreements can also expose local farmers to increased competition, challenging domestic food production (IMF, 2023).

International Organizations and Development Partners

International organizations play a crucial role in supporting Nigeria's food security through development assistance. Organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) provide technical assistance, funding, and capacity-building programs to strengthen Nigeria's agricultural sector (FAO, 2022; World Bank, 2023). For instance, the FAO promotes sustainable agricultural practices, focusing on climate-smart agriculture, improved irrigation, and access to quality seeds and fertilizers (FAO, 2022). These development Partners formalize their involvement in Nigeria's development initiatives through a compact with the Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning. This compact ensures that all programs are aligned with the Government of Nigeria's priorities. While the Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning coordinates the government's side, the UNDP oversees the coordination of Development Partners on development aid, ensuring streamlined and targeted efforts to address the nation's pressing challenges, including food security. These initiatives address environmental degradation and climate change, which threaten food security.

Similarly, the World Bank supports projects to improve rural infrastructure, access to credit, and agricultural technology. The FADAMA (floodable or flooded floodplains) program empowers smallholder farmers with extension services, inputs, and market information, enhancing agricultural productivity and reducing food insecurity (World Bank, 2023). Several other developments partners provide development funds targeted at improving food security but these funds are disproportionately directed towards northern states in Nigeria with only a few selected states from eastern and southern Nigeria. Development partners like Nutrition International (NI) play an important but supplementary role in tackling food security issues, particularly in addressing malnutrition through targeted interventions. Their efforts focus on improving nutritional outcomes, especially among vulnerable populations such as women and children in conflict-affected areas. This practice could further drive or heighten vulnerabilities leading to conflict.

It could further create regional disparities, which would leave other parts of the country underfunded. However, the sustainability of these programs is a challenge, as they often depend on continued donor funding. Development projects must be tailored to Nigeria's specific needs, considering diverse environmental, social, and political factors to ensure long-term success (IMF, 2023).

Conclusion

The politics of food security and social change in Nigeria is a complex interplay of local, national, and international forces. The heart of Nigeria's food insecurity lie systemic issues such as poor governance, corruption, environmental degradation, and political instability, all of which significantly influence the country's agricultural productivity and access to food. Moreover, international relations, global market dynamics, and the dependence on food imports complicate

Nigeria's efforts to achieve food sovereignty. This paper has demonstrated that the politics of food security in Nigeria is a key driver of social change, influencing migration, labour dynamics, gender roles, and the socioeconomic vulnerability of marginalized populations. Food insecurity is critical not only for alleviating hunger but also for fostering equitable social transformation in the country. Nigeria's food security challenges are further exacerbated by external factors such as trade policies, market volatility, and international food aid, which create both opportunities and risks for the country's agricultural sector. Sustainable solutions to Nigeria's food crisis require a multifaceted approach that addresses the political, economic, and social roots of the problem. This includes empowering local farmers, improving governance, promoting gender equality, and reducing dependency on food imports.

Recommendations

Going through the above submissions, the following recommendations were made:
Supporting smallholder farmers must become a national priority by offering targeted subsidies and affordable agricultural inputs.

➢ The development of climate-resilient infrastructure is critical. By expanding irrigation systems, the reliance on rain-fed farming can be minimized. In parallel, adopting drought-resistant crops and efficient water management practices will enable year-round agricultural productivity, ensuring resilience against environmental challenges.

➢ Federal Government, through the FIRS, should collaborate with state governments to eliminate duplicate taxes on foodstuff transportation across states.

➢ Empowerment women in agriculture can transform Nigeria's food security landscape. Women must have equal access to land, credit, and training. By expanding women's access to modern agricultural technology and decision-making platforms, their productivity can be greatly enhanced, which will directly contribute to improved household food security.

➢ Reducing Nigeria's dependency on food imports is crucial. The country must diversify its agricultural output to reduce reliance on imported staples like rice and wheat. Introducing protective trade policies and offering incentives will promote local food production.

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