

FEEDING PEACE: HOW FOOD EQUITY CAN REBUILD SECURITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In Nigeria, persistent insecurity has often been addressed through military interventions and law enforcement strategies. However, the role of hunger and food inequality as root causes of violence, unrest, and organized crime remains underexplored. This paper argues that food equity is not just a humanitarian issue but a critical security imperative. Through a multidisciplinary desk review of academic literature, policy reports, and case studies, this research examines how systemic food insecurity fuels social unrest, youth fanaticism, banditry, and displacement in Nigeria. It also explores bold, community-driven strategies including the use of surplus food as a tool for peacebuilding in conflict zones, USSD-based logistics systems to connect rural farmers to consumers through a single-dispatch model, and the integration of vulnerable populations such as Almajiri, homeless youth, and rural women as trained agricultural laborers in exchange for food, shelter, and basic amenities. Additional solutions include youth-led training in solar-powered agro-security infrastructure and policy reforms that promote land access, transparency, and food equity, each forming part of a sustainable, multidisciplinary pathway to national stability. The research concludes that meaningful progress in national security requires a fundamental shift toward inclusive food system reform. Bridging the gap between food access and peacebuilding can offer a more sustainable path to stability in Nigeria

Introduction

In Nigeria, the food crisis and insecurity are deeply connected. Hunger is not just a sad consequence of poverty; it is one of the major reasons why many parts of the country remain unsafe today. When people do not have enough food to eat or cannot afford it, they become desperate. This desperation can push them to commit crimes, join armed groups, or become involved in violent activities just to survive. In short, when food is missing from people's tables, peace is missing from society.

Hunger Makes People Vulnerable to Recruitment by Armed Groups

One of the main reasons why insecurity is growing in Nigeria, especially in the northern parts, is because extremist groups like Boko Haram use food and money to lure people, especially young boys, into their ranks. A report by the Danish Institute for International Studies explains that Boko Haram often recruits poor, hungry children and youth by offering them food, jobs, and protection (Plambech & Cold-Ravnkilde, 2016). When the government and society fail to meet people's basic needs, these groups fill the gap. In this way, food becomes a weapon, either for peace or for violence.

Displacement and Conflict Destroy Farming and Food Systems

The constant fighting between farmers and herders, bandit attacks, and insurgencies in the North East and North West have made it nearly impossible for many Nigerians to farm their land safely. According to the International Crisis Group, herders are migrating south because of climate change, population growth, and violence in the North, which causes clashes with farmers in central and southern Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2017). These clashes destroy crops,

burn down farms, and scare people away from their communities, making it hard to produce enough food for everyone. In places like Borno and the Lake Chad region, violence has not only pushed people out of their homes, but also ruined irrigation systems, blocked markets, and made it difficult to grow or buy food. This means that people in conflict zones are hungry not only because of poverty but because war has destroyed their ability to farm or buy food.

Lack of Food Creates Frustration and Crime in Cities

Even in cities, the food crisis causes insecurity. Poor people in urban areas spend more than half of their income on food (Tacoli et al., 2013). When prices rise or jobs are lost, these families cannot afford basic meals. According to a study by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), four out of five poor urban households in southern African cities go hungry at some point (Tacoli et al., 2013). The same is true in places like Mathare in Nairobi, where food takes up almost half of what people earn each month.

In Nigeria, people living in slums or homeless youths often turn to crime, such as robbery or violence, because they cannot afford to eat or feed their families. Women also suffer heavily, they skip meals so their children can eat and sometimes have to sell their labor cheaply or accept abuse just to survive (Tacoli et al., 2013).

Food Price Increases Lead to Public Unrest

When the price of food rises suddenly, it affects everyone, especially the poor. In 2008 and again in later years, sharp increases in food and fuel prices led to street protests, riots, and increased anger toward the government. People expect their leaders to help them access affordable food. When this fails, public trust collapses. In Nigeria, past governments have been accused of corruption and of not properly distributing food aid (Howard, 2019). When people believe food is being hoarded or stolen by the rich, it creates resentment and fuels civil unrest, riots, and even rebellion

Proposed Interventions for Implementation

Vulnerable Populations as a Resource: The Role of Almajiri, Homeless Youth, and Rural Women

Marginalized populations such as Almajiri children, homeless youth, and rural women represent a vast but underutilized labor pool. In northern Nigeria, Almajiri boys, originally enrolled in Islamic education systems, are often found begging in the streets for survival.

Without opportunities for structured education or employment, they are vulnerable to exploitation by extremist recruiters.

This proposed model emphasizes training these groups as low-income agricultural laborers. Instead of relying solely on welfare systems, they can be given the opportunity to work in government-managed farms or food processing factories in exchange for housing, food, healthcare, and basic amenities. This idea aligns with suggestions from Howard (2019), which emphasize community empowerment and targeted job creation in fragile contexts.

By integrating women into the agricultural labor force, the model also supports gender equity and improves household nutrition. Many rural women already contribute significantly to farming, but their work remains undervalued and unsupported. Providing them with training, tools, and guaranteed support systems can significantly increase productivity and resilience.

This approach is not just economically efficient, it also builds dignity and belonging, two factors crucial in reducing susceptibility to radical ideologies.

Food as a Peacebuilding Tool in Conflict Zones

One of the most creative ideas explored in this research is the deployment of surplus food as an incentive for peace. Conflict-prone communities, particularly in the North-East, often suffer from food blockades, deliberate crop destruction, and restricted market access. Rather than treating food solely as aid, it is strategically deployed as a tool for negotiated peace.

This model is inspired by past relief interventions but goes further: communities can receive regular, high-quality food supplies in exchange for laying down arms, ceasing banditry, or collaborating with peacekeepers. This approach demands trust, careful monitoring, and transparency, but the promise of stable access to food could outweigh short-term violence for many affected communities.

According to Tacoli et al. (2013), food is often the single most expensive expenditure in poor households, and its availability dramatically alters people's behavior. Providing food in exchange for peace offers a humane and effective solution, one that aligns closely with Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Bridging the Digital Divide: USSD-Based Logistics Systems for Farmers

While Nigeria's agriculture sector is rich in potential, it suffers from poor logistics, fragmented markets, and digital exclusion. Many rural farmers cannot afford smartphones or mobile apps, making it difficult to access market information or coordinate deliveries.

This research proposes a USSD-based logistics solution that connects farmers directly to a national database where they can register their produce and schedule pick-up times. Dispatch riders or community buses act as a single middleman system, collecting produce and delivering it to urban buyers or food banks.

This model eliminates price inflation caused by exploitative intermediaries and offers rural farmers fair compensation. It also creates thousands of jobs in the dispatch and transport sectors. Inspired by Bizikova et al. (2022), who call for innovative and inclusive food system reforms, this solution blends digital inclusion with employment generation and food accessibility.

By using USSD, a technology available on button phones, this system ensures accessibility even in the poorest regions. It is simple, scalable, and cost-effective.

Youth Training in Solar-Powered Agro-Security Infrastructure

Nigeria's energy infrastructure is fragile, and rural farms often suffer from a lack of electricity for irrigation, storage, and processing. This paper proposes a youth-centered program to train technicians who can install and manage solar-powered systems in farming communities.

These systems may include solar water pumps, cold rooms, electric fences, and agro- drones. Youth from conflict-prone zones are ideal candidates for such training programs, which provide both employment and a stake in national development.

As supported by Thomas-Emeagwali and Lasisi (1988), local agricultural processing innovations can uplift communities. When combined with modern technology and renewable energy, the impact becomes exponential.

Training should include practical skills, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and peace education. Youth can then form cooperatives, serve as service providers, or build agri-tech startups. These opportunities reduce the appeal of militancy, drug trafficking, and illegal migration.

Combating Embezzlement and Improving Transparency

One of the greatest threats to successful food equity reform in Nigeria is systemic corruption. Over the years, countless agricultural and food distribution initiatives have been undermined by embezzlement, favoritism, and misallocation of resources. Funds meant for farming inputs, food aid, or rural development often disappear into private pockets, while food supplies are diverted along political, ethnic, or elite patronage lines. This mismanagement not only worsens hunger but also erodes public confidence in government programs and discourages donor support.

To build a more transparent and equitable food system, this paper proposes a multi-tiered approach, combining grassroots participation with technological innovation and international oversight:

1. Community-Led Monitoring Boards:

Every state and local government area should establish independent food monitoring boards made up of trusted community members such as religious leaders, teachers, women's groups, and local civil society representatives. These boards will oversee the receipt, storage, and distribution of food-related resources and report suspicious activities. Their local knowledge and accountability to the community make them less susceptible to elite capture and better positioned to detect irregularities early.

2. Real-Time Data Tracking via USSD:

To bypass the digital divide and ensure even rural, low-income populations can report and access information, a USSD-based reporting system should be deployed. Farmers, food vendors, and beneficiaries can dial short codes on basic phones to report stock shortages, supply delays, or discrepancies in food distribution. This data can feed into a centralized dashboard accessible to the monitoring boards, government agencies, and third-party auditors. Such a system democratizes accountability by putting monitoring power in the hands of everyday Nigerians.

3. Blockchain for Urban Supply Chain Verification:

In larger cities and commercial food hubs, blockchain technology can be used to verify every step in the food supply chain, from government procurement to delivery at retail centers. Blockchain provides a tamper-proof record of transactions and resource flow, making it extremely difficult for officials or contractors to falsify reports or siphon off supplies without detection. Piloting blockchain in urban centers where infrastructure allows can set the stage for wider adoption in the future.

These mechanisms align with findings from Howard (2019), which emphasize that inclusive governance, citizen participation, and robust data systems are crucial for preventing elite capture and policy failure. When communities are empowered to hold institutions accountable, and when those institutions are supported by reliable data, food systems become more resilient and equitable.

In addition to domestic mechanisms, the role of the Nigerian diaspora and international development

partners cannot be overstated. Diaspora-led organizations and donor agencies can support transparency through funding conditionalities, independent audits, and advocacy. Their involvement adds external pressure and global scrutiny, which can act as a deterrent to corruption.

Transparent and accountable resource management does more than just protect food supplies, it rebuilds public trust, improves participation, and ensures that the benefits of reform reach those most in need: the poor, the vulnerable, and the excluded. Without transparency, even the most well-intentioned food strategies risk failure. But with it, Nigeria can create a food system that is not only efficient, but fair, just, and capable of supporting lasting peace and prosperity.

Policy Recommendations and Pathways

Achieving food equity in Nigeria requires the collaboration of multiple sectors:

- **Agriculture:** Support smallholder farmers with subsidies, extension services, and market access.
- **Technology:** Expand USSD and solar-based innovations.
- **Education:** Integrate food and peace education in school curricula.
- **Gender:** Empower rural women through land rights and targeted training.
- **Security:** Train peacebuilding volunteers and incentivize disarmament through food provision.
- **Governance:** Strengthen anti-corruption mechanisms and improve local food policy.

These pathways are mutually reinforcing. Together, they transform food systems from fragile to resilient, and from inequitable to empowering.

Conclusion

Nigeria, blessed with fertile land and a youthful population, continues to face both food insecurity and violent unrest, two crises deeply linked and largely preventable. This paper has shown that hunger is not just a byproduct of poverty but a root cause of insecurity, radicalization, displacement, and the weakening of social trust. Feeding millions with dignity is not a luxury, it is a matter of national survival. Lasting peace cannot rely on military force or elite-driven reforms alone. It must begin at the root: with food equity.

Through a multidisciplinary desk review, this study has argued that food equity is a national security strategy. When nourishment becomes inaccessible, vulnerable populations such as the Almajiri, homeless youth, rural women, and displaced persons become prime targets for recruitment into extremist groups. As Plambech & Cold-Ravnkilde (2016) show, Boko Haram exploited this hunger to build loyalty and power. Therefore, reversing this trend demands systems that feed both stomachs and spirits, with hope, purpose, and dignity.

Among the solutions explored is a dignity-based agricultural labor exchange, where vulnerable

populations voluntarily work in exchange for food, shelter, and basic services. As Tacoli et al. (2013) emphasize, tackling food insecurity in low-income areas requires addressing income poverty and weak infrastructure, factors that fuel instability.

Additionally, USSD-based logistics systems and a single-dispatch model can connect farmers directly to consumers, making food more accessible, lowering costs, and reducing corruption. Bizikova et al. (2022) support such tech-enabled, community-centered models as essential to building sustainable food systems.

Surplus food can also serve as a peacebuilding tool, strategically used to stabilize conflict zones, not as handouts, but as incentives for disarmament and reconciliation. Reports by International Crisis Group (2017) and Badmus (2005) confirm that material security builds trust and reduces violence. To make these efforts sustainable, the paper advocates youth training in solar-powered agro-security. This innovation addresses power gaps, offers employment, and strengthens food protection systems. De Jong (2021) argues that agricultural reform must be inclusive, youth-led, and tech-driven for long-term impact.

However, as Howard (2019) warns, corruption threatens all progress. Thus, the paper stresses the need for transparency, digital tracking, citizen monitoring, and independent audits—to prevent elite capture and policy failure. Food must be at the center of Nigeria's peace and development agenda. Feeding peace is about restoring dignity, trust, and shared purpose. With climate change and demographic pressures intensifying, the time to act is now. A well-fed Nigeria is a secure Nigeria, and to feed her people is to heal her future.

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