
Nigeria and the Challenge of Food Security: Options and Prospects

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Abstract

Food security has become an issue of great concern among countries of the world, owing to steady depletion of global food reserve. Nigeria, a country stupendously endowed with great human and material resources and once famed for her leading agricultural products, is in no way insulated from this burden. Over the years, the country has, through various policies and programs, approached the issue with a view to increasing food production by instilling the culture of farming in the people. In spite of huge sums and efforts sunk into these programs, they failed to achieve the goal of growing enough food for the people. This paper explores the myriads of challenges confronting food security in Nigeria. The paper posits that Nigeria's over reliance on, and obsession with crude oil exacerbates her food security problems and that apparent lack of sincerity on the part of the government, corruption and contradictory government policies are at the root of why policies aimed at boosting food production have so far failed. The paper suggests ways of tackling these challenges and concludes that the task of ensuring adequate food for Nigerians requires innovative agricultural policies, renewed commitment on the part of political leadership to co-ordinate the efforts and energy of the citizenry to achieve increased food production.

Keywords: Food security, Innovative agricultural policies, over reliance on crude oil.

Introduction

The founding fathers of Nigeria had dreamt of a great nation of peace and prosperity at the time they fought for political emancipation from Britain. They were buoyed in their determination by the emerging country's envisaged stupendous human and material wealth as endowed by providence. These were symbolically brandished in the country's paraphernalia of authority. The Nigerian flag of Green White and Green makes case for peace and prosperity occasioned by the assurance of abundance in basic human needs. Whereas white represents peace, green represents Nigerian's fertile landmass watered by rivers Niger and Benue: a sure sign that agriculture would thrive and lead the way to food security and abundance in basic human needs. Things went accordingly and so the people looked forward to eventual declaration of independence with enthusiasm.

Nigeria's currency dominations made a more eloquent statement demonstrating our agricultural might by showcasing the pix of the groundnut pyramid in the North, palm produce in the East, cocoa in the West and rubber in the Midwest. Things went well and Nigeria stood tall as the Agric hub of Africa and beyond. She earned foreign exchange from the sale of her crops and grew basic food for local consumption until the discovery of the *devil's excrement* in 1956 (a la Juan Pablo Perez Alphonzo, 2005). The discovery of oil at Oloibiri in 1956 and its commercialization from 1958 marked a turning point in the social, economic and political life of the Nigerian state. This took a turn for the worst when oil eventually emerged as the sole

foreign exchange earner and major source of income for the country. Efforts originally made for the production of groundnut, cocoa and palm produce for which Nigeria was globally renowned with, declined. Interest in Agriculture and food production waned as “petro dollar” became the new political and economic slogan. Our value system, even among the rural populace, was not spared. Interest in farming declined as young men and women headed for the cities in search of greener pastures made attractive by oil dividends. Leaders and the power elite embarked on unfettered importation of Uncle Ben’s rice and a variety of other foreign foods. This way, the foundation of food insecurity was led in Nigeria.

Today Nigerian’s population is growing geometrically. It is estimated at over one hundred and seventy million while food production is moving in the opposite direction. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) which is an agency of the United Nations (UN) cited in Okechukwu et al (2014: 15) has raised alarm that Nigeria, Morocco and Bangladesh, face imminent food crisis, adding that the world food situation is in dire straits. Ojo and Adebayo (2010: 207) quoting Abba Ruma, Nigeria’s former Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources, revealed that 65 percent of the Nigerian population is suffering from lack of food security, 40 percent of children under five are stunted and 25 percent are under weight. According to them, the poverty situation of the country is brought home by the 2006 Global Index of Hunger which ranked Nigeria as the 20th poverty-stricken nation.

This paper looks at the challenges confronting food security in Nigeria and the efforts made by the various governments in the country to ensure the production of adequate food for all and the reasons why these efforts have not been effective in achieving that end.

Food Security: A Conceptual Analysis

There has been a lot of intellectual brainstorming about the challenge of food security across the world and not a few feathers have been ruffled about the glaring evidence of impending threat to food security on a world wide scale, especially among low income people of the underdeveloped countries.

What actually, does food security entail? Scholars have written profusely on the concept of food security and its dimensions.

To begin with, the World Bank (1986) cited by Orefu Abu (2012:31) defined Food Security as access by all people at all times to enough food for an active healthy life”. This definition has different interrelated elements (IFSS 2002). These are; Food availability, i.e. the effective of continuous supply of food at both national and household levels; the ability of nations and households to procure adequate food on a continuous basis and equally addresses issues pertaining to purchasing power and consumption behavior (Abu, Op cit). Other components include reliability of food which has to do with the question of safety and nutrition; and food distribution which has to do with equitable and even distribution of food at all times to points and places of demand. Institute of Food Safety and Security (IFSS, 2002) noted that a country might enjoy food insecurity in the localities at various periods of the agriculture cycle.

Citing Keutlinger (1985: 7) and Idachaba (2004: 2), Ojo and Adebayo (2012: 4) held that a country is said to be food secure when majority of its population have access to food of adequate quantity and quality consistent with decent existence at all times. There is economic dimension to food security. This has to do with the possession of the means of the people to access and acquire food of adequate quantity, quality and safety at all times (Davies 2009: 4, Ojo and Adebayo 2012: 4). Poverty is thus a major threat to food security in different households. The National Planning Commission of Nigeria, (2004: xiv) cited by Oyeshola et al (2009: 1) held that poverty is dynamic and has many dimensions. According to it “people may move in and out of poverty as a result of natural disaster, of health problems, lack of access

to credit, or lack of natural resources. Other sources of poverty include, among others, lack of assets, such as land, tools, credit and supportive network friends and family.

It is in this regard that food security is invariably a human rights issue. The right to life can only be enjoyed when access to food of adequate quantity, quality and safety is guaranteed.

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the universal declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and referred to it as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. Right to Adequate food and to be free from hunger (Article 25) happens to be one of the rights (Ojo and Adebayo 2012: 5). The World Food Conference of 1974 in Rome re-echoed this when it declared that every man, woman, and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop their physical and mental faculties (U.N World Food Conference, 1974: 3, cited in Wada, 2012:180).

Jenkins and Scanlan (2001: 718) stated that food is the most basic of human needs. It is to the discussion of human rights and social development. Ojo and Adebayo (Op cit) report that Eight Hundred million people around the world suffer from severe malnutrition arising from hunger and starvation, thus making right to food the most highly abused of all human rights.

Food insecurity which is the flip side of food security usually manifest in severe hunger or starvation and malnutrition. This according to Okechukwu et al (2014:17) can either be chronic or transitory. Chronic food insecurity represents a perpetual inadequacy in diet arising from the lack of resources to produce or procure food. Transitory food insecurity on the mother hand refers to a temporary decline or cessation in household access to enough food. It arises from instability in food production and prices, or in households' incomes. Abu (2012: 31) citing Smith and Subandoro (2007) laments that food insecurity has continued to be a key development problem across the globe, which has continued to undermine people's health, productivity, and often their survival.

Generally a country is deemed to be food secure when the majority of its population has sustained access to food in sufficient quantity and quality consistent for decent existence (Keutlinger 1985, Idachaba 2004, Abu 2012: 32).

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 1996) noted that food security is attained when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Thus the main purpose of food security is for individuals to be capable of obtaining adequate food needed at all times and to be able to use food to meet the body's needs (Wada 2012: 174). The World Bank (2001) cited in Wada (ibid) also identified three dimensions of food security, insisting that any nation whose food production level is incapable of satisfying these three elements is deemed to be food insecure. These are; food availability, food accessibility and food utilization.

Furthermore, citing the World Food Summit Plan of Action (1996), Wada (2012) asserted that food insecurity exists when;

- i.** People encounter a large reduction in their sources of food and are unable to make up the difference through new strategies.
- ii.** The incidence of malnutrition is abnormally high for most of the year, and this cannot be accounted for by either health or care factors.
- iii.** A large percentage of the population or group is using marginal or unsuitable strategies and
- iv.** People resort to using "Coping" strategies that are damaging to their livelihoods in the longer term or incur some other unacceptable cost, such as acting illegally or immorally.

This means that food security does not inhere in a situation where some households resort to making do with or consuming certain unwholesome items in order not to leave the stomach empty or to resort to illegality or immorality as means of accessing food to evade starvation due to poverty or lack.

The United Nations proclaimed food security as the most basic human need and the main parameter for measuring absolute poverty and physical wellbeing (Ojo and Adebayo 2012: 204). This requires that people have ready access to food (UNDP 1994: 24, cited in Jenkins and Scanlan 2001, Ojo and Adebayo 2012).

This is measured using two indicators:

- 1) Food Supply as the mean daily per capital supply of calories and protein and
- 2) The child hunger rate which is measured by the percentage of children under age 5 who are undernourished (FAO 1996, UNDP 1994, Ojo and Adebayo 2012).

Challenges Confronting Food Security in Nigeria

It is no longer news that Africa (Nigeria inclusive) faces the real threat of food crisis as many of her citizen's battle with malnutrition, diseases and death arising from hunger and starvation. Ojo and Adebayo (2012: 204) report that chronic food insecurity now affects some 28% of the population that is nearly 200 million people who are suffering from malnutrition. Acute food insecurity which erupted in 2003 is now affecting 38 million people in Africa who are facing outright risk of famine with 24,000 dying from hunger daily. They explained that famines are most visible and extreme manifestation of acute food insecurity, revealing that of the 39 countries worldwide that faced food emergencies at the beginning of 2003, 25 are found in Africa.

As mentioned earlier, Nigeria prior to independence and the discovery of oil, had no problems with food security as the people produced enough to go round. The situation was the same in most parts of Africa before the advent of colonialism. Today, the situation is as already painted above.

This section analyses the factors that turned Nigeria from being self-sufficient in food to being food insecure. Africa generally was self-sustaining even in food production and security prior to colonialism. There is no record to show that she depended on external food aid from anywhere at that time. However, with the consolidation of colonial rule, everything changed. The economies of African territories were re-organized in response to the needs of Europe. The people were made and in most cases, forced to de-emphasize food production in order to enhance the production of cash crops needed by European industries. Europe need coffee, cocoa, rubber, groundnut etc in prodigious quantity. To get enough of these, the land used in producing cassava, yam, cocoayam, beans etc were converted to cash crop plantation. In some places like the French Congo, emphasis on the production of Indian rubber was so high that the natives were given the option to pay taxes with rubber. In Bangui, fifty eight women and ten children were at a time held hostage to force their male relations to bring rubber (Chinueizu cited in Akamere 1987: 91) This was corroborated by Wada (2012: 178) Thus;

“During the colonial era, different types and patterns of exploitation took place. For instance, land was alienated and appropriated for the production of the desired agricultural commodities. Peasant commodity production was disrupted and hence redirected and regimented towards cash crop production for extraction and export”.

This way the economy of Nigeria and other African territories became dual the European capitalist cash crop economy and the subsistence economy of the natives on which drudgery the natives clung to for food.

As the struggle by Nigerian elites for reforms gathered momentum, and as the country inched her way towards self-government, commitment to food production began to improve with the creation of more awareness on the social relations of production within the colonial economy. But before this could be consummated, news of the discovery of crude oil filtered out of Oloibiri. Export of crude oil began in 1958 and the commercial value of the product soon became public knowledge. The zeal for the production of both cash crops and food crops underwent a precipitate decline. With the achievement of political independence and rise in the price of oil in the international market, attention of the ruling elite turned to oil and the nation eventually became obsessed with the product. This led to the total neglect of agriculture. The production of food came to be left in the hands of the rural farmers who have no knowledge of the application of modern techniques that improve yield.

As Federal ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources (FMAWR (2008) cited in Abu (2012) revealed, more than 90 percent of agricultural outputs is accounted for by households with less than 2 hectares under cropping. Secondly, the application of fertilizers and other agricultural inputs among these farmers in Nigeria is said to be the lowest in Sub Saharan Africa, about 7kg/hectare (ibid).

Since most of the available food in the market is either imported from Europe or other regions of the world, it is only those who possess the purchasing power that can access and acquire it. Many households in Nigeria are among those said to be living below the poverty line - on less than one dollar per day. Poverty is therefore one major challenge to food security in Nigeria. To worsen the situation, the Naira has continued to suffer steady devaluation. This further erodes the purchasing power of the poor.

Besides high cost of food, the increase in the prices of agricultural inputs affects the rural farmers who need fertilizers to improve their harvest. To worsen the situation, farmers in Nigeria have no access to credit. According to Okechukwu et al (2014), less than 10 percent of irrigable land is being irrigated. The farmers thus rely on rainfall which has become unreliable owing to climate change.

Conflicts and political instability have not helped matters either. The insurgency in Northern Nigeria has had adverse effect on food security in the South as major food items like yams, fish, tomatoes, pepper, beans and livestock come from there. This has forced prices of these items to hit the roof top.

Okechukwu et al (2014: 18) revealed that the crisis in the North have forced some of the crop farmers and pastoralists to abandon their lands and relocate to neighboring countries of Niger, Chad and Cameroon. And in March 2014, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) (cited in ibid) reported that 65 percent of Northern farmers had migrated to the South because of the insurgency they faced, warning that the country risked famine by the end of the year as most of the small scale famers and mechanized farmers in the North East are threatened by terrorist attacks.

Overview of Government's Agricultural Policies to Ensure Food Security

The increasing incidence of malnutrition occasioned by dwindling food supply worldwide has forced countries to embark on policies that would improve food production and availability. This is because as Lucas (2007: 3) cited in Oyeshola et al (2009: 1) stated, no nation in this modern world can truly be great if it cannot feed her population and no meaningful progress

can be made in other sectors of life if there is scarcity of food for the people. No system whether capitalism, socialism or other political ideologies that mushroomed in Africa and other parts of the world, can sustain the loyalty of underfed and impoverished people.

Nigeria has initiated and implemented several policies under different regimes using various semantic descriptions to increase food production and ensure food security.

In 1956, the Western and Eastern regions initiated farm settlement schemes. Dr. M.I. Okpara on taking over from Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe as the premier of the Eastern Region began to implement his ideology of “pragmatic socialism” This political ideology encouraged organized agricultural sector. He established farm settlements in the Ohaji area of the present Imo State. The scheme involved the building of housing estates provided with pipe borne water, roads, schools and other facilities that attracted young men to take to farming while enjoying same facilities as their mates in the urban cities. The scheme led to massive production of cassava products, yams, cocoa yams, plantains, bananas etc. In all, Okpara’s pragmatic socialism was such a huge success that in 1964 international economic assessors declared the economy of the then Eastern Region as the fastest growing economy in the third world at 12.7 percent (Akamere 2004: 211).

The military coup of January 1966 and the outbreak of the civil war were to bring the scheme to an inglorious end.

At the end of the war in 1970, and pushed by the increasing incidence of kwashiorkor among children of the South Eastern part of the country, the General Yakubu Gowon administration embarked on massive importation of rice to mitigate the high mortality rate especially among children due to malnutrition.

Ojo and Adebayo (2012: 207) citing Ekpu (2009: 12) recalled that the Nigerian ports did not have the facilities to handle the huge importation of what came to be called “*The Rice Amada*”. This led to congestion and a decongestion committee had to be setup. At the end of the day, massive importation of rice could not tackle the long term problem of food security. At a point Nigerians suggested to the Yakubu Gowon regime that the over bloated army which became redundant following the end of the civil war could be drafted to the farm to boost agricultural production. This was however discarded for security reasons (Ojo and Adebayo (2012: 207). In 1976, General Olusegun Obasanjo initiated a scheme known as Operation Feed the Nation (OFN). A lot of resources were lavished in giving the scheme such elaborate promotion as to instill in Nigerians, the passion of farming. Nigerians, irrespective of class or profession, were encouraged to own a farm or at least a garden. According to Ekpu (op.cit), those who didn’t have farms or gardens resorted to flower pot farming.

The Euphoria notwithstanding, the scheme did not produce the bumper harvest envisaged and cynical Nigerians nicknamed the program “*Operation Fool the Nation*”.

Alhaji Shehu Shagari’s government from 1979, also promoted an agricultural policy aimed at encouraging Nigerians to take to farming as a way of boosting food security. Known as Green Revolution, the policy failed woefully both in its bid to encourage Nigerians to take to farming and in producing food to feed the populace, due mainly to corruption and contradictory policies that defeated the purpose of the programme.

The same government that sought to promote farming soon embarked on massive importation of rice under a special presidential directive. It was so massive that people began to thank a ministry of rice was in the offing. The presidential rice import policy was superintended by the then Transport Minister, Alhaji Umaru Dikko. This massive importation of food and other

items continued unabatedly at the detriment to domestic food production. A second republic politician even boasted to have imported sand from Saudi Arabia to build his house. In 1985, General Ibrahim Babangida came up with the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI). It was meant to be a comprehensive integrated program to boost food production and effect rural transformation but ended up a victim of massive corruption.

Since the inception of civilian dispensation in 1999, several policies and schemes have also been put in place under the Obasanjo as well as Jonathan's regimes, all aimed at boosting domestic food production and tackle food insecurity. But in spite of claims by the government that the policies have recorded huge success, there is nothing on ground to support such claims. These policies look fantastic in conception but they face the same problems as those earlier discussed. Besides the politicization of the policies, corruption is a major problem. Most of the Agricultural cooperatives that get access to government's monetary assistance are indeed conjured up by politicians while the real farmers remain unaffected by such incentives especially those who don't have influential politicians to give them the needed link. Money budgeted for such policies are often seen as political patronage by those in charge. Poor budget implementation and deceitful government claims are part of reasons why these policies fail to see the light of the day. For instance, out of the ₦182.2 billion earmarked for the 2003 rice initiative of President Obasanjo, only ₦5 billion was released (Tell, May 5, 2008: 25).

In addition to inconsistency on the part of government, poor access to credit and Agric inputs are serious weakness and threat to Agricultural development in Nigeria. Accordingly, poor infrastructure including rural roads, water supply, storage facilities, electricity, poor budget allocation to Agricultural sector, poor and inadequate irrigation facilities are real obstacles to food security in Nigeria (Okechukwu et al 2014).

As mentioned earlier, government is known to lay claims to high percentage of success for these schemes, the reality on ground has continued to put such claims to question. The former minister of Agriculture, Dr. Akinwumi Adesina was quoted as saying that as a result of the e-wallet scheme introduced by the Jonathan's administration, national food production increased by 21 million metric tons between 2011 and 2014, surpassing the 2015 target of 20 million metric tons (The Nation April 6, 2015: 19). But statistics from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) shows that Nigeria imported about 900,000 metric tons of maize valued at about ₦31 billion from the United States in the last six years. Besides, in spite of governments acclaimed breakthrough in the production of cassava, records reveal that Nigeria still imports starch, which is a derivative of cassava; she imports maize from the United States, and she imports palm oil. The continued importation of these products till today is evidence of the failure of the government and its agricultural policies (The Nation (April 6, 2015: 19).

President Olusegun Obasanjo had also in a National Day Broadcast, October 1, 2004 claimed that agricultural sector had recorded unprecedented annual growth rate of seven percent (7%); that the strategic grains reserve had reached 150,000 tons and still rising. The government had also claimed that increased food production had encouraged the World Food Program to contemplate the establishment of an office in Nigeria from where it would obtain food for other African countries in need. There is nothing on ground yet to support the claim (Ojo and Adebayo 2012: 210).

Options before the Nation

From the analysis so far, it is certain that the major cause of food insecurity in Nigeria is poverty. This is a result of the inability of the Nigerian state to ensure equity in the distribution and management of the Nations enormous wealth. As a result, while the vast majority of the citizenry are left to wallow in abject poverty, without access to food, a modicum of the population who form the ruling elite swim in stupendous wealth. To reverse this trend, a number of steps need to be taken.

1. Measures should be put in place to ensure equitable distribution of the nation's wealth by ensuring equal opportunity for all.
2. There should be empowerment programs for women and youths through education and skill acquisition.
3. Agriculture should be made attractive to the youths, school leavers and graduates. There should re-introduction of farm settlements, the type established by late Dr. M.I Okpara in the defunct Eastern Region and provided with modern facilities and infrastructures including water, electricity, roads, schools, storage facilities etc. This will attract the youths to proudly take up agriculture as a dignifying job.
4. More importantly, there is need to promote the idea of good governance. The World Bank (cited by Babawale 2005) defined good governance to imply putting in place structures that promote accountability and probity to support the capacity of the government to manage effectively any reform program.

Other scholars mostly of African descent have however expanded the scope of good governance to include such elements as; predictability in government procedure, respect for civil liberties, adherence to rule of law, the practice of constitutionalism, legitimization of the leadership, transparency in decision making and implementation, pluralism in policy options, popular participation in government and equity in governance (Akamere 2013: 236).

With this and going by Nigeria's vast human and material endowments, the prospects for food security in Nigeria will certainly be high and bright. Good governance will reduce instability and curb internal conflicts and crisis and bring about lasting stability in the polity, leading the way to peace which is germane to economic growth and National Development.

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