

## Nigeria's food insecurity crisis: a look at food politics

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### Abstract

Food is a political matter which questions how food systems are constituted, how they change or do not change and who gains or loses while implicating power relations from the supreme to the ultimate consumer. The Nigerian food system does not produce enough food to feed everyone. With her increasing population comes the huge growing demand for affordable food, both among the rural and urban populations but the local agricultural productivity is low and inefficient. Due to this, Nigeria depends on food imports to meet the growing demand, and this has not only increased Nigeria's food imports but has also become a norm, that it is preferred to import wheat, cereals, rice and milk among other things instead of deeply investing in our local agricultural farms, thus resulting in a substantial trade deficit for the agri-food sector and increasing the gap in the domestic food supply. Underinvestment in the agricultural sector has limited the development of agri-businesses and agricultural value chains in Nigeria. The low level of agricultural services is the major issue in Nigeria's food value chains. And as the gap in domestic food supply becomes larger, Nigeria becomes more dependent on 'cheap' food imports to work as a quick fix to the food deficit which not only addresses the low agricultural productivity that keeps the deficit in place but also increases food adulteration and food fraud.

**Keywords:** food insecurity, value chains, transformative food politics, food supply chain, food policies.

### Crise de insegurança alimentar na Nigéria: um olhar sobre a política alimentar

#### Resumo

A alimentação é uma questão política que questiona como os sistemas alimentares são constituídos, como mudam ou não mudam e quem ganha ou perde, implicando relações de poder desde o supremo até o consumidor final. O sistema alimentar nigeriano não produz comida suficiente para alimentar a todos. Com o aumento da população, surge a enorme demanda crescente por alimentos acessíveis, tanto entre as populações rurais quanto urbanas, mas a produtividade agrícola local é baixa e ineficiente. Devido a isso, a Nigéria depende de importações de alimentos para atender à crescente demanda, e isso não só aumentou as importações de alimentos da Nigéria, mas também se tornou uma norma, que é preferível importar trigo, cereais, arroz e leite, entre outras coisas, em vez de profundamente investindo em nossas fazendas agrícolas locais, resultando assim em um déficit comercial substancial para o setor agroalimentar e aumentando a lacuna no abastecimento doméstico de alimentos. O subinvestimento no setor agrícola limitou o desenvolvimento de agronegócios e cadeias de valor agrícola na Nigéria. O baixo nível de serviços agrícolas é o principal problema nas cadeias de valor alimentar da Nigéria. E à medida que a lacuna na oferta doméstica de alimentos aumenta, a Nigéria se torna mais dependente de importações de alimentos 'baratos' para funcionar como uma solução rápida para o déficit de alimentos, que não apenas aborda a baixa produtividade agrícola que mantém o déficit, mas também aumenta a adulteração de alimentos, e fraude alimentar.

**Palavras-chave:** insegurança alimentar, cadeias de valor, políticas alimentares transformadoras, cadeia de abastecimento alimentar, políticas alimentares.

#### 1. Introduction

According to IGI (Idea Group Incorporated) Global, food politics refers to the political atmosphere, institutions and processes or content that either deter or promote food security or insecurity. It also refers to relations of

power among groups and individuals at the governmental and non-governmental levels in the food system (Amadi; Allen, 2020).

How does the food system support food politics? Food systems contribute a considerable part of the national economy and influence developmental issues eating deep into the country, some of which include hunger, malnutrition, diet-related disease, poverty, livelihood, unemployment and ethnic violence. Improving the current food system can initiate a positive change in the political food reign of Nigeria. The fundamental goal of the evolving system would be to attain the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

### *1.1. The global view of food politics*

Food implicates matters of production, reproduction, distribution, and consumption across global, national, and local scales. Food provides a vital lens through which an interlinkage across global, national, and local scales could be integrated and address various contemporary development challenges. Food is also a political matter which questions how food systems are constituted, how they change or do not change and who gains or loses implicating power relations of many kinds. An intense politics of food is unfolding across the world as modern food systems prove themselves neither sustainable nor equitable with profound and intergenerational consequences for human well-being, and prosperity (Leach et al., 2020).

Political processes address how and why a range of theoretical and disciplinary approaches is necessary to capture and cast a new light on the politics of food and, in particular, on the opportunities and challenges to build a more capable, equitable and sustainable food system, as well as on the broader politics of development, in which these are embedded. Since 2015, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have come to dominate policy discourse and action. With the adoption of Agenda 2030, the international community committed itself to eradicating hunger and poverty and to achieving other important goals including making agriculture sustainable in the production and consumption of food and making economic growth inclusive. It is increasingly recognized that the place of food and nutrition in the SDGs goes beyond Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) to encompass synergies and tension with many other goals (Leach et al., 2018).

For decades, the number of hungry people in the world has been declining but this pattern has reversed in recent times as new estimates indicated that global food insecurity and malnutrition persist and remain stubbornly high with almost 822 million people continuing to suffer from hunger and nearly 2 billion people experiencing some form of malnutrition. Obesity is rising, levels of micronutrient deficiencies have stagnated, and unhealthy diets are now considered the leading global cause of diet-related (Afshin et al., 2019). In addition to this, conventional food production processes are keeping many workers and farmers in a state of powerlessness and poverty. Also, the case of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the multiple fragilities and vulnerabilities in food systems. In this context, there are urgent calls for food systems to be reformed or fundamentally transformed (De Schutter, 2017; IPES-Food, 2020; Oliver et al., 2018).

International policy around food including the SDGs is often driven by the language of technocracy and assumptions about the incremental policy which hide vital cross-cutting questions of power and politics. By exploring the diverse ways in which food system change necessarily and deeply political, the aim to contribute to a more transformational politics of food towards systems that are more sustainable and equitable is approached (Leach et al., 2020). A holistic food system lens is concerned with food processes - from the provision of inputs and farmer training to product packaging and marketing - and how these processes interact with one another and with the environmental, social, political, and economic context (Ericksen et al., 2010).

The key approaches to global food politics and power show how power is located and conceptualized and how a change in the food system takes place. Each of these food politic approaches draws from broader, underlying disciplinary and theoretical perspectives in the analytics of politics and power. These food political approach include (Leach et al., 2020):

1. Food interests and incentives
2. Food institutions
3. Food regimes
4. Food contentions and movement
5. Food innovation systems
6. Food discourses

## 7. Food socio-natures

The approach termed food interests and incentives come from long traditions of methodological individualist and rational choice perspectives, such as those found in neoclassical economics as well as in pluralist perspectives in political science. Here, it is presumed that change would come from altering the market or behavioral incentives to individuals - whether it is farmers making production decisions or consumers making buying decisions - thereby altering interests and decisions and food system outcomes (World Development Report, 2008).

Food institutions explore institutional perspectives in economics, political science, and political economy analysis. Here, power is viewed to be embedded in and operating through institutional arrangements which might be formal or informal, extending from those at the household, community, government, or international level (Clapp, 2012). Food regimes take a more structural and historical perspective drawing from world systems theory stretching back to historically shaped political, social and value regimes including relations between states and capital and their supporting ideologies (Gramsci, 2000). Food contentions and movement locate relatively more power and agency in the capacity to bring about change in social mobilization and collective action, countering dominant power and interests (Tilly; Tarrow, 2015). Food political approaches based on food innovation systems, conceptualize power as relational rather than held by a single factor or institution. Here, the focus is on particular system features like elements and drivers, their interactions and the interplay of innovation, learning and adaptability in bringing out change across scales (Geels, 2004). Food discourses capture multiple perspectives which locate power more firmly in ideas rather than people, institutions, or systems, seeing power exercised through the ability to construct or control the framing or narratives around a given issue (Leach et al., 2020). Finally, the food socio-natures externs its concern to diverse ways of knowing, of being, especially between the boundaries and interdependencies between human and non-human nature. This approach understands change as involving the agency of plants, animals, and other aspects of non-human nature with which human action is interdependent and mutually constituted (Haraway, 2016).

These approaches offer a rich conceptualization of food politics by attending to power on multiple levels, referring to the different layers of decision-making and authority held on a vertical scale including the local, national, and global, in multiple forms referring to how power manifest itself (Gavanta, 2006). Most of the world's food-insecure people live in countries which have yet to make the necessary headway towards the structural transformation of their economies. Political interests and incumbent powers contribute to lock-ins and it's needed to get rid of the negative and limited opportunities for positive action that can lead to a fundamental transformation of both food and associated livelihood systems (Bene et al., 2019). This is why transformative intervention might be needed to unlock the potential for shifting such structural constraints- like social protection measures focused on asset transfers in dividing land redistribution (Devereux; Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). Thus, making progress towards the SDG targets to enhance food systems and improve livelihood would depend on transforming rural areas and this progress would be more on inclusive political and policy processes (agricultural policies) and rural change (Gupta; Pouw, 2017).

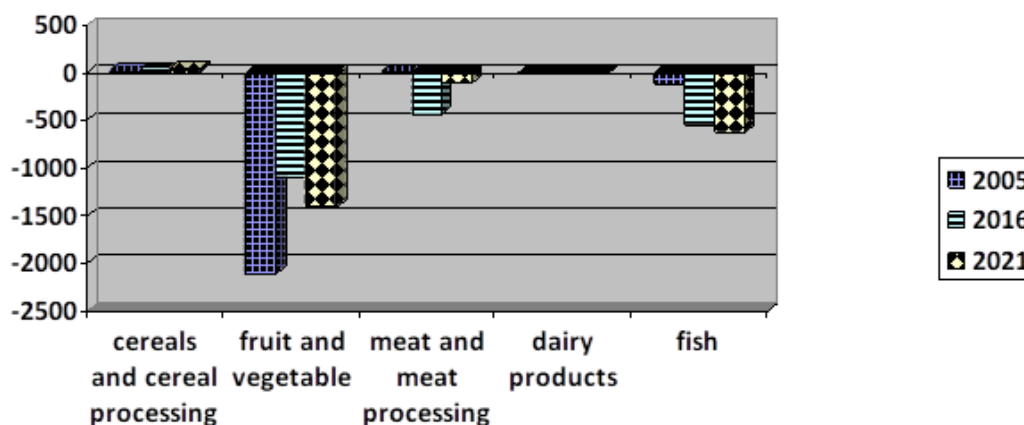
### *1.2. The Nigerian food system and food insecurity*

As the most populated country in Africa, Nigeria has a population growth rate of 3% annually which will further increase as the year grows older (World Bank, 2019). The food system does not produce enough food to feed everyone. With the huge growing demand for affordable food, both among the rural and urban populations, the local agricultural productivity is low and inefficient. Due to this, Nigeria depends on food imports to meet the growing demand, and this has increased Nigeria's food imports more than quadruple from a value of 964 million US dollars in 1995 to 4,566 million dollars in 2016 and still counting (FAO, 2019), resulting in a substantial trade deficit for the agri-food sector and increasing the gap in the domestic food supply.

As the gap in domestic food supply becomes larger, Nigeria becomes more dependent on 'cheap' food imports, which works as a quick fix to the food deficit but does not address the low agricultural productivity that keeps the deficit in place. In addition, the foreign exchange obtained through crude oil exports is declining, which lowers the GDP and in turn, public investments in the agri-food sector. Moreover, low productivity levels affect the livelihoods of rural households, who are struggling to earn a decent wage. Among households in rural areas, 71 percent of the population is food insecure (Maziya-Dixon, 2004). According to FAO stat (2019), Table 1 and Figure 1 show the average trade deficit in some of the agricultural produce between 2005, 2016 and 2021.

**Table 1.** Trade deficit for key agricultural sectors in 2005, 2016 and 2021 (FAO, 2019).

	Cereals and cereal processing	Fruit and vegetable	Meat and meat processing	Dairy products	Fish
2005	20.4	-2111	10	-3	-125
2016	30.6	-1085	-431	-4	-557
2021	45.9	-1406	-107	-9	-624



**Figure 1.** Trade deficit for key agricultural sectors in 2005, 2016 and 2021 (FAO, 2019)

Currently, the Nigerian food system is delivering large amounts of expensive, unsafe, and unhealthy foods produced in unfriendly environments and unsustainable ways while households remain chronically poor and vulnerable to food insecurity. With the prevailing recession, more than half of the Nigerian population still grapples with extreme poverty, while a small group of elites enjoys ever-growing wealth. This is the current state of poverty and economic inequality in Nigeria. Over the past 40 years, the gap between the rich and the poor has been growing wider and at the same time, the poorest people are being denied their fair share. In Nigeria, the scale of economic inequality and food insecurity has reached extreme levels and found its expression in the daily struggles of the majority of the population (Emmanuel et al., 2017).

The Nigerian economy is largely driven by the informal economic sector, which is estimated to account for 65 percent of the GDP (IMF, 2017). The supply chains within the informal sector are shaped by power imbalances between trader and farmer associations. Traditional market authorities such as so-called ‘market queens’ are important in organizing trade, acting as trade brokers while accumulating both wealth and power within the commodity markets (Clark, 2018). Although policies for agricultural sector transformation have been created (such as political agenda for import substitution), weak formal institutions, corruption, and conflicting political and economic interests prevent their implementation. These phenomena of weak formal market institutions and concentrated power among a small group of traders reinforce each other making it difficult to bring about change through policy interventions which results in low investments in the agricultural sector. Therefore, the enabling environment is limiting agricultural productivity, and this is evident by poor rural infrastructure, poor access to information updates, services and quality inputs, low food safety standards, low processing capacity, and high post-harvest losses. As a result, the production costs, and thus domestic food prices, are high while domestic food supply remains low.

Underinvestment in the agricultural sector has limited the development of agri-businesses and agricultural value chains in much of Nigeria. The low level of agricultural services (finance, extension, quality inputs) is an issue in most value chains. It is the same for rural infrastructure and facilities for processing and storage, whether this is for cold chains (e.g. dairy), perishables (e.g. vegetables, cassava), or staple food products (e.g. cereals). The low agricultural productivity and limited value addition within these value chains also obstruct opportunities to generate more rural incomes within the agri-food sector, adding another disincentive for investments (by

producers and processors). AGRA (2018) reports that Nigeria is taxing the agricultural sector, meaning that farmers receive lower prices than entitled, without any policy interventions and this is creating strong disincentives for farmers.

Also, investments in the agri-food sector are considered high risk, due to lack of transparency and high transaction costs in the fragmented value chains, lack of infrastructure and facilities, and high susceptibility to external environmental, economic, and political factors. Although access to finance is difficult for some small value chain actors, there is private capital present in the agri-food system. This underinvestment affects all parts of the agri-food sector which includes institutions, science and technology, rural infrastructure (roads, processing facilities and storage), availability of data and information, agricultural services (including extension, inputs, agri-finance). As a consequence, productivity in the agricultural sector is generally low and food production is not sufficient to meet the growing demand. Under the pressure of the population growth and accompanying food consumption, this food deficit is only growing, with Nigeria becoming more reliant on food imports for feeding its population. Though serious attempts are being made to transform the agricultural sector through policy, the underinvestment in many parts of the agri-food sector prevents it from making a transformative change. This includes private investments in export crops (e.g. cocoa, cashew, oil palm), resulting in a huge unused potential for the export of agri-food crops and foreign exchange earnings. As such, the enabling environment is constraining agricultural productivity rather than enabling it, characterized by poor rural infrastructure, poor access to information, services and quality inputs, low food safety standards, low processing capacity, and reportedly high post-harvest losses. As a result, the production costs and domestic food prices are high while the domestic food supply remains low (Helena et al., 2019).

Large-scale traders and importers have vested trade interests in food imports. These also have private capital to strengthen their position, and are thought to use corruption to guarantee their power and interests. Many value chains for staple crops are characterized by concentrated power in cartels and vested interests. This opposes policies and also due to limited capacity in terms of financial and human resources, attempts to strengthen the institutions and enabling environment for sustainable and inclusive growth of the agri-food sector. As private capital accumulates, successful private entrepreneurs gain more power (e.g. market queens), but smaller entrepreneurs and young adults struggle to set up businesses because of a lack of (access to) capital. This dynamic also has a major impact on employment and entrepreneurship: those with capital could easily set up a business in the agri-food sector, giving rise to the group of so-called 'telephone farmers'. However, those without starting capital or collateral (e.g. youth or women) struggle to start up a business due to a lack of resources. Lack of market information, fragmented value chains, and corruption make it a difficult environment for an outsider to invest (Helena et al., 2019).

Food insecurity is the condition in which all people do not have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2002). Food insecurity connotes a situation in which people lack basic food intake to provide them with the energy and nutrients for fully productive lives. The intended level of food security requires the availability of food supply, adequate access to food supply, appropriate utilization of food and stability of food supply. Food availability for farm households in rural areas means ensuring that sufficient food is available for them through their own production or through sufficient purchasing power to purchase food from markets. Access by households and individuals to appropriate foods for a nutritious diet depends on income available to the household, on the distribution of income within the household and on the price of food. Food utilization depends on optimal uptake of nourishment, which is a function of a sustaining diet, child care, clean water, adequate sanitation and healthcare (UNEP, 2002). Stability of food supplies means that households should not risk losing access to food as a consequence of sudden shocks such as climatic crisis or cyclical events such as seasonal food insecurity (IFPRI, 2009).

The number of undernourished people in Nigeria has been increasing annually by 1 million malnourished people such that in 2010 the number of hungry people in Nigeria was estimated at 4 million. This increase has been attributed to neglect of agriculture relevant to very poor people by governments and international agencies, the current worldwide economic crisis, and the significant increase of food prices (FAO, 2010). Nigeria is experiencing a multiple malnutrition burden of under-nutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies alongside overweight, obesity and associated diet-related non-communicable diseases. The Nigerian government now embraces sustainable food system approaches in its policy and programme to address these malnutrition problems in the country but the question remains, how fast would this policy resolve food insecurity in Nigeria? The smallholder farmers who make up 80% of farmers in Nigeria are also affected by the insecurity as they are

killed and displaced, leading to poor farm yield and loss of livelihood due to fear of being kidnapped or killed in their farmlands (Helena et al., 2019).

As a means of responding positively to the impending problem, a transformative food politics that demands a comprehensive approach to the current food system problems which would move the current Nigerian food system beyond its isolated acts of resistance and redundancy is highly needed. It would work towards the institutionalization of alternative food discourse in both policy and practice and necessitates the development of interrelated solutions that simultaneously consider and address social justice, ecological sustainability, community health, and democratic governance in a comprehensive and contextualized way. To reform what is left of the system now, a transformative food politics rebuilds the social, economic, and political infrastructure through creative experimentation, concrete actions and feasible projects that provide inspiration for ways that a different kind of food system could function.

### *1.3 Current impact of transformative food politics in Nigeria*

In a country that dedicates 78% of her land to agriculture, how is it possible that 20% of her population suffers from moderate acute malnutrition and 6% experiences severe acute malnutrition? To improve Nigeria's food system, there is need for sustainability. In addition to the periodic droughts and floods that affect rural areas lacking good infrastructures, the conflict between the Nigerian military and Boko Haram seriously affects the Nigeria's food system as hunger perpetuates conflict and vice versa but unfortunately Nigeria's struggle mainly occurs in the rural agricultural areas. Without change, Nigeria would continue to struggle to feed its population. A transformative food politics which gathers Nigeria's Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning, rural citizens, women, private businesses and youth group, aiming to create a sustainable food systems while adhering to the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs) would serve to "effectively articulate feasible pathways to sustainable, resilient and equitable food systems for Nigeria" (Dana, 2021).

A transformative food politics involves reforming land tenure systems, developing food system pathways from the farmer, the industries to the consumers, investing in alternative power and paving rural roads. First, infrastructural development remains the key in developing Nigeria's human capital, food security and reducing poverty. Paving roads would increase food accessibility and ensure better agricultural pathways. Moreover, Nigeria also intends to provide opportunities for youth and women as they make up more than half of Nigeria's population, so, investing in youths and women would benefit future agricultural industrialization and impact a food literate population growth. Doing this will curb poverty growth by 2030 (Emmanuel et al., 2017; Dana, 2021). Secondly, food policies are designed to influence the operation of the agricultural and food system in Nigeria, balanced with ensuring her citizen's health needs but corruption has eaten deep into the enforcing organizations, who take money over the public health and food safety ensuring that food policies are on the override for some individuals on their payroll.

Nigeria faces the challenge of providing adequate food supply for her growing population and issue of food safety poses a more daunting challenge. To deal with this, policies and programs aimed at boosting agricultural and food production are being actively promoted but yet is still gets corrupted on its way to actualization. An effective national food safety policy provides the assurance that food supplied to the consumers is adequate, nutritious, of good quality and wholesome. Having these policies in abundance solves 20% of the problem, 80% lies on the integrity of the persons who make up the enforcing organizations responsible for adherence of these policies.

The government of Nigeria launched the National policy on food hygiene and safety in 2000 as an integral part of the Nigerian National health policy. The overall goal of this policy is the attainment of high level of food hygiene and safety practices which would promote health, control food borne diseases and minimize risks associated with poor food processing and safety. It seeks to stimulate and promote legislations concerning food in areas of production, storage, handling, processing, preservation, trade, transportation, and marketing. The policy also seeks to improve the quality of health care through ensuring that all food consumed (imported or exported) in Nigeria is wholesome, nutritious, contaminant-free and accessible to the consumers. The implementation of the policy is aimed at addressing the unsatisfactory level of food hygiene and safety practices which is responsible for the prevalence of food insecurity in the country. The institutional arrangement for the execution of these policies runs from the Federal Ministry of Health to the State and Local Governments, with the intermediary conveying bodies as National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Standards Organization of Nigeria (SON), National Codex Committee and Federal Ministry of Agriculture, respectively. All existing food laws, standards and codes are enforced by these individual agencies.

But what happens when these dependable laws and standards are enforced by undependable individuals? The problem of food insecurity continues and grows larger. However, efforts at coordinating and integrating them should be into movement. Food is identified globally as not only a biological need but also as an economic and political weapon. So, if Nigeria continues with food insufficiency and insecurity, she would continue to face socio-political problems. Therefore, efforts should be made to coordinate all existing food control infrastructures, resources, and these intermediary conveying bodies with a view of redefining their roles and eliminating overlap and conflict areas (Omotayo; Denlope, 2002).

Finally, the need for an improvement in the implementation of the national food hygiene and safety policy should be recognized. Also, future collaborations with countries and regulatory institutions in the area of capacity building in terms of manpower, infrastructure, effective risk analysis of food safety and food security, information management and biotechnology should be considered in order to effectively deal with environmental challenges like flooding which affects small holder farmers –who make up 88% of Nigerian farmers and cause massive damage to infrastructure like bridges and roads, cutting off farmers physical access to needed inputs, markets for their goods and consumer access to their produce, in turn leading to food supply chain disruptions, increased prices, destruction of farm produce and stored reserves (Omotayo; Denlope, 2002; Jane, 2022).

## 2. Conclusions

The productivity in the Nigerian agricultural sector is generally low and food production is not sufficient to meet the growing demand. Under pressure of the population growth and accompanying food consumption, food deficit is only growing, with Nigeria becoming more reliant on food imports for feeding its population. The essence of a transformative food political approach is an emphasis on the partiality of dominant perspectives on food economy and this is to confront power in the food system in order to encourage food system transformation by enforcing these existing food policies. Thus, encouraging investments in the agricultural sector to expand agricultural services and the development of agri-businesses and agricultural value chains in Nigeria.

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## 4. Authors' Contributions

*Ifeoma Elizabeth Mbaeyi-Nwaoha*: Conceptualization, investigation, data analysis and writing. *Chidera Juliet Nnamani*: Conceptualization, investigation, data analysis and writing.

## 5. Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest.

## 6. Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

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