

RURAL INSECURITY AND THE FOOD SECURITY QUESTION IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Agriculture was once the mainstay of Nigeria's economy during the colonial period and early years of the independence era. However, this trend reversed with the passage of time due to certain factors that resulted in the neglect of the agricultural sector. The poor state of the agricultural sector and the food security situation in the country appears to have been worsened by the rising cases of insecurity, especially in the rural areas. This study sought to appraise the food security situation in Nigeria amidst the trend of rural insecurity that has led to the displacement of large number of farmers, loss of lives, and the seeming inability of security agents to stem the tide of threats or criminal acts that restrict access to farmlands and which constitutes serious barrier to agricultural production. The study adopted a qualitative approach and employed an ex-post facto form of presentation, relying on mixed methods for data gathering. The documentary evidence was subjected to content analysis. The framework for analysis was anchored on the human security theory. The findings reveal that rural insecurity constitutes grave danger to agricultural production, which jeopardizes food security in the country. The basic recommendation is that there is need for decisive government intervention to urgently address rural insecurity so as to achieve sustainable food security.

Keywords: *Insecurity, rural areas, food security, agricultural production, internally displaced persons*

Introduction

Agriculture occupies a central position in the economic development and general wellbeing of every nation. It plays a critical role in transforming economies to reach the goal, along with achieving other essential development goals like ensuring food security and improving nutrition (Lin, 2018). Indeed, agriculture is not only the primary means of ensuring food availability but also a vital source of employment, income generation, and raw materials for industrial development. In many developing economies, agriculture sustains the majority of households, particularly in rural areas where alternative sources of livelihood are limited (Trentinaglia, Baldi, & Peri (2023). A nation that is unable to provide sufficient food for its citizens faces serious risks, including dependence on imports, widespread hunger, and malnutrition. Thus, the strength of a nation's agricultural system goes a long way in determining the extent of her social stability and wellbeing of the citizens.

Historically, Nigeria was a leading agricultural economy in Africa, relying heavily on the production and export of crops such as cocoa, groundnuts, cotton, and palm oil. These commodities provided substantial foreign exchange earnings and supported the livelihoods of millions of rural households. However, the discovery of crude oil in the late 1950s and the subsequent oil boom of the 1970s shifted national attention away from agriculture. The enormous revenue generated from crude oil export created a false sense of economic security for the country, leading to the neglect of agricultural investments and the gradual collapse of mechanization and infrastructure in the sector (Ahemba, 2008). Food imports increased, traditional farming became predominantly subsistence-based, and productivity declined. By the time the global oil price plummeted, leading to a sharp decline in the revenue accruing from crude oil, the country witnessed an immediate economic shock and exposed the dangers associated with the neglect of the agricultural sector. The immediate consequence manifested in rising cost or scarcity of food items, export deficit, and rising concerns for food security in the country.

Indeed, the government had at various times made promises towards improving agricultural production and reviving the agricultural sector. As a way of proving commitment to the promises, different policies were churned out in this direction. For instance, the government introduced the National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP) in 1972 under the incumbency of General Yakubu Gowon; Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) was launched in 1976 by the military administration of General Olusegun Obasanjo; the Green Revolution Programme was introduced in April 1980 by the Shagari administration; the Back to Land policy was introduced in 1983 under the military regime of Muhammadu Buhari; the Ibrahim Babangida administration established the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in 1986; the National Special Programme for Food Security (NSPFS) was established by Obasanjo during his tenure as civilian president that lasted between 1999 and 2007; Umaru Yar'Adua launched the National Food Sector Plan (NFSP) during his regime that lasted from 2007 to 2010; Goodluck Jonathan launched the Agriculture Transformation Agenda (ATA) in 2011; the civilian regime of Muhammadu Buhari introduced the Agricultural Promotion Policy (APP) in 2015 (AgroNigeria, 2025; Oyeleke, 2021; Udegbonam & Mojeed, 2020). The Tinubu led-government has equally introduced some agricultural policies and schemes such as the four major mechanisation schemes enshrined in the Renewed Hope Agenda, which include: The John Deere Tractorisation Programme, the Greener Hope Project, the Green Imperative Programme, and the Belarus Project (Ojo, 2025).

Undoubtedly, the basic objective for introducing the policies is to achieve increased food production, self-sufficiency, and food security. Unfortunately, the successive policies of the government were marked by inconsistencies, lack of continuity, and abysmal failure. Thus, the numerous promises and series of policies never yielded tangible policy outputs that could push the agricultural sector to satisfactory heights. Despite the promises and policies geared towards mechanizing agriculture in the country, majority of farmers, especially those in the rural areas, still practice the trade at the subsistence level, which limited agricultural production. The fact remains that a greater percentage of the country's domestic food supply still depends largely on

the rural farmers and farmlands located in rural areas. Unfortunately, the efforts of these rural farmers towards food production are being threatened by the growing insecurity that appears intractable, thereby creating a double jeopardy with regard to limited production capacity and insecure environment for farming.

As it seems, insecurity has emerged as one of the most serious threats to agricultural development in Nigeria within the present era. Across different regions, cases of farmer-herder conflicts, banditry, and violent insurgencies abound, leading to the displacement of farmers and farming communities from fertile agricultural lands. These conflicts and violent acts often result in destruction of crops and farm produce as well as killing of farmers. As a result, thousands of farmers abandon their homes and migrate to safer areas or become dependent on humanitarian assistance. Current estimates suggest that more than 2.2 million Nigerians have been displaced as a direct result of insecurity in rural regions, disrupting food production and weakening the agricultural economy (Ayetoto-Oladehinde, 2022).

The displacement of farmers is capable of creating widespread food shortages. When large areas of cultivable land are abandoned, harvests are bound to decline and supply chains would be disrupted. It is a known fact that shortage of food items would lead to food scarcity and create inflationary tendencies. From casual observation, food inflation in Nigeria has reached unprecedented levels in recent times. This situation has compelled many families to cut down on the quantity and quality of food they consume while forcing some others to live at the mercy of humanitarian agencies and caring community members.

It is in the light of the foregoing that this study seeks to appraise the security situation in the rural areas with a view to ascertaining its impact on food security in the country.

Conceptual Clarifications

There are certain concepts that form the basis of our study, which include insecurity, food security, agricultural production, and Internally Displaced Persons. We need to understand them, especially how they are applied in this work. Hence, they are conceptualized hereunder.

Insecurity:

The term insecurity is a derivative from the concept of security. Thus, understanding its meaning would be made easier by first of all understanding what security stands for because it is by so doing that one can appreciate what it means when it is lacking. On the face value, insecurity stands for absence of security or a condition where security is lacking. Security has been explained by different scholars in a manner that suggests that it has an ambiguous or varied meanings. For instance, the opinions of contributors like Francis (2006) and Zebadi's (2007) draw attention to what one can refer to as the traditional conception of security, which captures it from the angle of safety and survival of the state and its citizens from harm or destruction through the military apparatus or use of force. In effect, this view confines security to safety from harm or

destruction arising from physical attack. It is based on this perspective that one gets to hear of concepts like national security, which is believed can be guaranteed by acquisition of arms and ammunition or by increasing the military strength of a State.

With the passage of time, however, the concept has been given a broader meaning to stretch beyond the traditional viewpoint. Francis (2006) draws attention to the new idea about security that embraces non-military dimension or aspects that fall outside physical threats and attacks. Nnoli's (2006) view captures this new idea, as he talks about the three additional elements included while defining security in the contemporary world, as follows: the first involves the protection of the environment; the second has to do with the revival of the UN and the brighter prospects of collective security whereupon the emphasis shifts from the UN's traditional peacekeeping role to a war-detering one; and the third dwells on poverty in its ramifications. Bearing these in mind, it makes meaning when we hear about things like social security, job security, food security, security of lives and property, human security, and so on. In explaining the concepts of security and insecurity, Odum (2016, p. 199) had this to say:

We can say that security exists when we are able to mount defence against those things that could generate anxiety and constitute threat to human survival. On the other hand, insecurity occurs when we advertently or inadvertently create conditions that heighten danger, anxiety, and other conditions that threaten human survival.

Insecurity can be said to exist under the condition where individuals or groups live in constant fear due to threats to life, property, and livelihood. In the Nigerian context, the activities of violent groups such as the insurgents, kidnappers, bandits, armed robbers, terrorists, murderous herders, etc. are the main causes of insecurity. It goes without saying that persistent situation of insecurity disrupts peace and undermines development. It is against this backdrop that insecurity is being treated in this study.

Food Security:

Having understood security to mean freedom from anxiety, threat or harm, it becomes easier to understand the dimension of security, as associated with food. Food is central to human existence. It is unimaginable for a human being to exist without food. Indeed, absence of food constitutes serious threat to human existence because it can lead to not only harm associated with health conditions caused by hunger and malnutrition but also death. However, the definition of food security is not as simple as it seems. Gross, Schoeneberger, Pfeifer & Preuss (2000) have made it clear that the definition has not always remained the same in both the past and present but has evolved considerably over time, with the focus being initially on food availability to balance unequal food distribution regionally and nationally. To the extent that it is possible for food to be physically existent without necessarily getting to those who need it most or containing the right nutritional value, it was accepted that availability of food is not sufficient to guarantee food security (Odum, 2022). Hence, the need to search for a better definition.

Simelane and Worth (2020) stated that the definition of food security during the 1970s began to

change in 1990s when the concept of nutrition security was included in the definition of food security. Alive to this fact, Fahy (2021) defines food security as the measure of an individual's ability to access food that is nutritious and sufficient in quantity. That is to say, food security is no longer viewed from the angle of the quantity of food within a country, a given geographical region, or in the market but the ability of individuals living within the area to have access to the food in sufficient quantity and with the right nutritional value. As indicated by Benson (2021), Gross, Schoeneberger, Pfeifer & Preuss (2000), and Fraanje & Lee-Gammage (2018), there are four dimensions that are pivotal to the attainment of food security and they include: Availability (which means adequate food supply at the market or in the country); Accessibility (ability of individuals or households to have enough resources to acquire food items); Utilization (ability of individuals to have their systems digest and get the nutrients into their system); and Stability (adequate supply remains stable over time without witnessing disruptions or fluctuations. Beyond these, some contributors have opined that cultural acceptability should be considered as part of the concept of food security. According to Maxwell & Smith (1992), this relates to the way in which food contributes to the basic needs and well-being of individuals, households and communities, which should go far beyond its nutritional adequacy per se, and should encompass enjoyment, as well as the various social, religious, and cultural functions that food plays in the lives of peoples. As summarized by Odum (2022), food security is all about being safe from hunger by having access to quality food that would promote healthy life. As treated in this study, we see food security as availability of food and the ability of citizens to have access to nutritious food and in the right quantity under a circumstance that stability would be guaranteed.

Agricultural Production:

Agricultural production is an indispensable aspect of human life. It is part of the organized human activities associated with the post-Wandering Band era of human society. At the stage man adopted a sedentary lifestyle and stopped depending on accidental discovery of food, agricultural production became imperative. In the circumstance, man has to produce the food he consumes and can no longer depend on fruits and food items from the wild as a means of survival. At the point agricultural production was developed, planning has become part of the process for having access to food and its consumption. According to Adams (2023), production in Agriculture is the process of growing crops and raising livestock for food, fiber, and other products; it includes all aspects of farming, from preparing the soil and planting the seeds to harvesting the crops or animals and delivering them to the market. Equally, the IERE Team (2025) describes agricultural production as the process of converting natural resources into commodities that satisfy human needs and wants, primarily food, fiber, and fuel.

From the above, it stands to reason that any distortion in agricultural production will spell doom for the society. Once there is shortage in agricultural production, it will adversely affect food availability, accessibility and stability. Adams (2023) notes that there are two divisions of agriculture, viz: subsistence and commercial. Either way, they are all aimed at providing food and related items for the well-being of man. The major difference between them is the capacity and quantity being produced. It is worthy to note that agricultural production depends on

availability of land, manpower, farm inputs and implements, as well as conducive environment for the process to run through without disruption. In this work, we treat agricultural production as the processes that lead to provision of food and other related items, which include the clearing and tilling of land, planting of seeds, tending the food crops to maturity, harvesting, supplying to buyers/consumers or such other processes that relate to raising of consumable animals.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs):

When human beings stopped operating as Wandering Bands, they started having places of habitual residence, which they try to make as comfortable as possible. It is through such means that a sense of community was built. People get attached to their places of residence for so many reasons. Apart from being an environment to which they had gotten acclimatized, it serves as a place they keep their property and operate from there. When people go out to do their business, they return to their homes at the end of the day to have rest. Hence the saying: East or west, home is the best. It is therefore traumatizing for one to lose their home for any reason or abandon it unwillingly.

Relying on the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons under the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights described internally displaced persons (IDPs) as persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border (OHCHR, 1996-2025). Thus, the basic thing to note about IDPs include that they had places of habitual residence but were driven out from there due to factors beyond their control. That is, they were forced to relocate from their homes and in most cases, move to areas of lesser comfort. The major difference between IDPs and refugees is that while the former remain within the borders of their country, the latter are those that found themselves in similar circumstances but have crossed an internationally recognized State border to seek refuge. The circumstances under which displacement occurs vary. In cases where early warning was made, the persons being subjected to displacement might have the opportunity of taking along their valuable and portable belongings while fleeing. In cases where the cause of displacement was sudden and without early warning, they may lose almost everything that they had toiled for. It is worthy to note that there are properties that are not portable and which cannot be taken along by a fleeing person. For instance, a farmer trying to escape from a troubled zone cannot flee with his farmland and crops that are not yet ready for harvest. Again, such a farmer cannot access his farm while away and under the situation of displacement.

For the purposes of this study, we are looking at IDPs as it relates to rural farmers who fled their farms and places of habitual residence in an attempt to escape from incidents of communal clashes, menace of kidnappers, insurgencies, murderous herdsmen, terrorists, and intractable violence to settle elsewhere within the country.

The essence of our study is to find out how insecurity occurring in the rural areas has created problems such as the rising incidents of destruction of farms, abandonment of farmlands, and Internally Displaced Persons, which adversely affects agricultural production and jeopardizes the food security situation of Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Human Security theory. The scholars whose contributions helped in framing this theory include Barry Buzan, Ken Booth, Mahbub ul Haq, and few others. In our discussion on security, it was made clear that the meaning of security has changed over time. As already observed, the traditional conceptualization of security from the state-centric point of view began to give way to broader views with the passage of time. One of the broader views about security that emerged is the concept of human security. This concept of human security emerged in the 1990s and Mahbub ul Haq remains prominent among those that drew global attention to it. According to him, the era of human security is one in which the concept of security will change dramatically thus:

“Security will be interpreted as security of people, not just security of territory; security of individuals, not just security of their nations; security through development, not security through arms; security of all the people everywhere – in their homes, in their jobs, in their streets, in their communities, in their environment (Haq, 1995, p. 68).

The 1994 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that highlighted it advocated for a broader definition of security to lay emphasis on the safety and well-being of individuals rather than just the security of states (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). From this point of view, it can be understood that a country might be strong militarily and have the feeling of physical security while her citizens are facing existential threats and all manner of vulnerabilities that lower their living standards. The basic underlying idea of human security is about how to protect individuals from fear, threat, or harm and how individuals should be the central issue in security concerns. According to United Nations (2009), human security is a people-centered concept that places the individual at the centre of analysis. The *Commission on Human Security* (2003. P. 4) gave a definition of the concept in the following terms:

Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms – freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people's strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity.

As observed by the *Commission on Human Security* (2003), Human Security derives much of its strength from its dual policy framework resting upon the two mutually reinforcing pillars of

protection and empowerment. In summary, the Human Security theory is laying strong emphasis on the safety and protection of individuals or groups living within a community from harm, as opposed to the traditional state-centric conceptualization of security.

Application of theory to the study

Looking the main variables in our title: Rural Insecurity and the Food Security, we can see that they touch on issues that depart from the traditional view about security. We are not dealing with security from the traditional point of national security as it relates to the military strength of the country and her ability to wade off external aggression and defend her territorial integrity. By rural insecurity, we are looking at the issue of security as it affects the individuals living in the rural areas, and specifically, the rural farmers. Again, the concept of food security deals specifically with survival of individuals vis-à-vis their ability to have access to food for their survival and well-being. This theory becomes apt because it will help in making a robust analysis concerning the safety of rural farmers and how the security situation in the rural areas will affect agricultural production and availability of food, which the individuals living within the society depend on to satisfy their food and nutritional needs. The key principles of the theory, which includes people-centred approach, comprehensive framework, and prevention and resilience will serve as a basis for appraising the rural security situation and the food security question. In the final analysis, the theory will help in appraising how the government is taking care of the safety needs of the rural dwellers, whether a comprehensive or parochial framework has been adopted in tackling the problem, and whether the government is adopting proactive measures to prevent security threats before they occur or whether they wait for it to occur and then create IDP camps for the victims.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. We employed an ex-post facto form of presentation to project what has transpired in the area of rural insecurity with a view to ascertaining how it has affected the situation of food security in Nigeria. We generated data for this study through mixed methods by relying both the secondary and the primary sources. The secondary source was dominantly used and we generated data from books, journals, periodicals, government publications, and other relevant and reliable published materials. The primary source was limited to the unbiased observations made by the researchers. The documentary evidence was subjected to content analysis and we equally made efforts to match the observations with documentary evidence. In order to arrive at a reliable result. The human security theory served as our framework for analysis.

Rural Insecurity in Nigeria

As a country that had gone through civil war between 1967 and 1970, the history of violence and insecurity in Nigeria is a long one. Beyond the war, the country passed through moments of political instability and insecurity associated with the unstable nature of governance and leadership. The security situation of the country appears to be getting worse with the passage of time. In recent times, there is no part of the country that is spared from this menace. Most sections of Nigerian roads are not safe and appear like death traps because they are in deplorable state and prone to accidents. Cases of fake products capable of causing serious threat to the health of citizens abound. Most of the hospitals, especially the public ones, operate below standard and are incapable of giving people the feeling of safety that such facilities need to generate as institutions for healing the sick. The working class are faced with social insecurity. The economic hardship in the country creates tension in many a great number of Nigerians and give them cause to develop a sense of economic insecurity. Bandits, kidnappers and other forms of violent groups operate freely in the country to create tension and fear among the people. To worsen the situation, the security agencies appear to be either compromised or incompetent to protect citizens and keep them from physical harm arising from violent groups and criminals. Looking across the length and breadth of the country, there are indeed several factors to create in people the feeling of being unsafe. The general causes of insecurity in the country include the activities of bandits, terrorists, murderous herdsmen, cattle rustlers, armed robbers, kidnappers, Unknown Gunmen masquerading as separatist agitators, and cases of communal clashes, ethno-religious conflicts, farmer-herder conflicts, etc. as pointed out by Odum (2019), periods of elections in Nigeria, especially those conducted under civilian regimes, are equally marked by violence and general air of insecurity.

It is worthy to note that most of these incidents of insecurity affect the rural communities more because such areas lack the presence of security institutions and personnel to protect the people. Talking about the activities of Boko Haram insurgency, Saliu & Saka (2019, p.2) noted that, beginning from 2013, “the group had started to occupy villages and communities in remote parts of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states...” (my emphasis). In the same vein, Reuters (2025) reported how gunmen stormed Zamfara villages in a nonday attack, killing two people and abducting over hundred others. Reporting on the separate attacks that occurred in different parts of the country, Uthman, Odeniyi, Ojo & Charles (2025) drew attention to the case of a new terrorist group that engage in killings and kidnappings in rural communities around the Kainji Lake National Park, which spans parts of Kwara and Niger states. From the nature of these attacks, it is clear that the bandits operated freely and did not nurse fears about any confrontation with security agents, largely due to the fact that they were remote villages with no significant presence of security agents. The story about the attacks that claimed lives and property in some remote villages of Enugu State such as Nimbo and Mgbuji community in Eha Amufu revealed that security men drafted from other areas only succeeded in getting to the scene of the incidents after the attackers had finished with their murderous activities and the best help the security agents could offer was to participate in recovering the corpses of the victims (Duruiheoma, 2025; Chiedozie, 2016).

Farmer-herder conflicts have escalated in recent times. The main grounds for such crises are farmlands located mainly in rural communities. This brand of violent activities affecting the rural areas has spread to areas they were unknown before. For instance, such conflicts were known to have been localized around the northern parts and middle belt areas of the country. As captured by Umar (2024), the long-standing issue of farmer-herder conflict in northern Nigeria, often rooted in competition over land and water resources, has escalated into violent clashes that disrupt the lives of rural communities. On the other hand, Kontagora (2024) posited that the farmer-herder conflict in the Benue area, which began in the early 1800s has evolved into a complex situation in recent times and that its impact on human security was six times deadlier than the Boko Haram insurgency.

However, the insecurity challenge resulting from the farmer-herder conflict has spread to others parts of the country like the south East and South West in recent times, especially after the emergence of Muhammadu Buhari as the president of the country. Reports of death and carnage trail the activities of the murderous herdsman in their encounter with farmers over the issue of grazing lands and destruction of crops. Alabi (2025) reports how herdsman not only invaded but also occupied 44 farm settlements in the South Eastern State of Enugu. In discussing the consequences of such incidents, Olumide, Afolabi, Momoh, Agboluaje, & Ige (2025) also drew attention to how herders and bandits invaded the South West. The implication of these and other similar reports is that the challenges relating to the farmer-herder conflicts in the country is getting deepened instead of abating.

Other criminal activities that contribute to rural insecurity include cattle rustling. According to Madueke (2023), cattle rustling in Nigeria has evolved from a sustainable community practice into a significant illicit economy, delivering material profits to conflict actors and multiplying harms and the country has experienced a surge in the number of rustling incidents since 2011, resulting in thousands of deaths, loss of livelihoods, widespread destruction and displacement of people. Cattle rustling is more rampant in the northern part of the country where cattle rearing is common. In the process of rustling cows, the bandits raid communities and kill people indiscriminately.

Organized kidnap gangs that mainly use forest areas and remote villages as their hideouts and operational base also contribute to rural insecurity. In some cases, they prevent villagers from accessing their farmland due to the tension they create, or even drive them away from their residential areas as they attempt to escape the risk of being victims of kidnap.

The failure of security agents to confront and quell the violent activities that create insecurity in the rural areas has a debilitating effect on the security situation. In some cases, the farmers and residents of the troubled areas resign to fate, believing that the insecurity facing them cannot be surmounted and as such, must be accommodated. Stories about how some farmers in troubled rural communities pay ransom to harvest their crops or go to farm abound. According to Aina (2024), about one hundred and thirty-nine million naira was paid as farm levies (including planting and harvesting) to bandits within 2020 and 2024. Bailey & Balogun (2024) corroborates the narrative about farmers paying levies to bandits, though they put the figure at one hundred

and forty million. Things like this can only happen under a situation where the farmers must have concluded that the government cannot help them and that the only way to survive is to cooperate with the criminals on their own terms.

Indeed, rural insecurity has created horrifying effects on the rural communities. It has led to death and displacement of survivors from their communities. Aina (2024) cites a report by geopolitical research firm, S.B Morgen, as revealing that a minimum of 1,356 farmers have been killed, mainly in the Northern part of the country, between 2020 and 2024. From Plateau to Sokoto, Benue, and several other areas, stories abound about how entire villages were displaced due to the activities of herdsmen and bandits. While Adeyemi, (2025) tells the story about how bandits sacked nine Plateau communities and displaced fifteen thousand residents, Salman (2025) paints the picture about the ordeal faced by residents of eight communities in Sokoto that were sacked by bandits, and Kehinde (2025) gives account about how fifty Benue communities were displaced by armed herdsmen. More often than not, the displaced persons end up in IDP camps and quick efforts are not usually made for them to return to their homes. While at the camps, they do not have access to their farmlands.

It is quite believable that one of the major driving forces at the heart of the rising spate of insecurity – whether rural or urban – is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the country and the inability of the security agents to rise to the occasion and stop the trend. These weapons illegally found their way into the hands of those who should not have it. For instance, the Fulani herdsmen have not always posed challenge of national or international significance in the manner they started doing in recent times. Their monumental murderous activities came to limelight when they started bearing weapons, displaying it openly and using it with impunity to attack farmers who attempt to resist the destruction of their crops. Again, many people believe that the armed herdsmen got emboldened by the perceived support they started receiving from the government under the incumbency of President Buhari who got into power as a civilian president in 2015. Buhari at one point had to defend the group and sounded as if the arms they bear illegally was normal, saying that they use the arms to protect their cattle (*My Nigeria*, 2024). Hence, many people accused the government of complicity in the criminal activities of the murderous herders (Anuka, 2024; Gbaoron, 2024). The Adamawa incident escalated the belief that the herdsmen are receiving the support of the government and her agencies. The story went like this: A farmer, named Jackson was working on his farm when a suspected herder, armed with a knife, allegedly attempted to attack him but Jackson, acting in self-defence, managed to overpower the assailant, resulting in the herder's death; an Adamawa High Court sentenced Jackson to death in 2021 and the Supreme Court eventually upheld the sentence (Salami, 2025). Many people, especially Christians, protest against these rulings, saying that the ruling would not have gone that way had the herdsman been the person that killed the farmer.

Undoubtedly, the stories surrounding the insecurity affecting the rural areas suggest a serious rural security vacuum. While the existing trend is quite worrisome, the more worrisome issue is the fact that it appears insurmountable and may continue unabated into the future. The responses and interventions by the government at the moment seem grossly inadequate to contain the menace.

The Food Security Question in Nigeria

Looking at all the factors necessary to achieve food security, Nigeria does not present a satisfactory picture to be rated as a food-secure country and is most likely to be having serious problems in this regard. Already, existing reports appear as an indictment that the country is experiencing food security vacuum. The latest Cadre Harmonisé report released by the Government of Nigeria, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Food Security Sector partners, projected that 30.6 million people in 26 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) would face acute food and nutrition insecurity at Crisis (CH Phase 3) or worse during the June–August 2025 lean season (FAO, 2025). Meanwhile, this worrisome report shows that the figure is even an improvement from the figure released in 2024, which stood at 33.1 million. As indicated in the report, Nigeria continues to face the highest number of food-insecure people globally, with very high levels of acute malnutrition.

Nigeria has a long history of food security problem. Ever since the government shifted attention from the agricultural sector and concentrated mainly on the oil sector, the challenge about agricultural production and access to food manifested gravely. A Financial Times Survey (1981, p1) captured part of the background to Nigeria's food insecurity situation thus:

“...Nigeria, once a major exporter of agricultural commodities such as cocoa, rubber, oil palm, cotton and groundnuts, is now a net importer of practically everything. Overall, food demand has been growing at an estimated 3.5 per cent a year while agricultural output has managed a derisory 1 per cent annual increase.”

This observation that was made more than forty years ago still reflects to a large extent the country's situation at the moment. A current review made by the *Punch Editorial Board* (2025) reveals that despite having vast arable land, an abundant labour force, and significant agricultural potential, the country spends upwards of \$10 billion annually to import essential food commodities, whereas the country's earnings from agricultural exports currently stand at around \$400 million, or under 0.5 per cent of global volumes. With this kind of import-export deficit on agricultural products, it stands to reason that the numerous agricultural policies introduced at various times to promote agricultural production in the country did not yield meaningful results.

The review by the *Punch Editorial Board* further revealed that as of July 2025, food inflation spiked alarmingly, standing at 22.7 per cent, with staples such as rice (+129 per cent), beans (+217 per cent), and yams (+428 per cent) witnessing unprecedented price hikes. It further reveals that the agricultural sector underperformance has resulted in Nigerian households spending about 59 per cent of their income at the moment on food, the highest globally, which causes widespread food insecurity and deepens poverty, with over 106 million Nigerians living in extreme poverty. With reports like these, one cannot be in doubt as to what the situation of food security in the country looks like.

As already observed earlier, there are four dimensions that are pivotal to the attainment of food security. The first is availability, which means adequate food supply at the market or in the country. Availability is dependent on some factors that include the ability for the local food

production to satisfy local needs and, or the capacity to import adequate quantity to saturate the local market. Nigeria lacks the capacity to fulfill any of the two factors. The local agricultural production that depends more on subsistence farming is grossly inadequate to produce sufficient food for the market. On the other hand, the country lacks the financial resources to import basic food items in a manner that would satisfactorily fill the lacuna created by inadequate local production. The consequence is that the country is still battling with adequate food availability.

The next dimension pivotal to the attainment of food security is accessibility, which is the ability of individuals or households to have enough resources to acquire food items. It is a known fact that the forces of demand and supply determine the price of goods to a large extent. In view of the fact that availability or adequate food supply is not guaranteed, the implication on accessibility can be predicted. When there are many people chasing few goods, the price will get skyrocketed. For instance, the immediate result of displacement of farmers from their farms is that the price of the few food items in the market usually go up. The information above concerning Nigerian households spending about 59 per cent of their income at the moment on food speaks volume about the issue of accessibility. It simply means that the food items are too exorbitant to be considered accessible.

The third dimension is utilization, which is the ability of individuals to have their systems digest and get the nutrients into their system. First of all, one must consume food before the issue of digesting the food and getting nutrients therefrom. Again, it is only when someone consumes balanced diet that the person would expect to get the necessary nutrients from the food consumed. The economic situation in Nigeria does not allow many Nigerian households to have access to adequate food containing the right amount of nutrients. More often than not, many people simply eat whatever food that is available in order to fill their stomach and not to get the best of nutrients.

The final dimension is stability, which means that adequate supply should remain stable over time without witnessing disruptions or fluctuations. The country has never attained adequate supply in the first instance and so the issue of maintaining stability does not arise. Seasonal farming and lack of storage facilities make it impossible to maintain any form of stability with the little quantity of food being produced. For instance, the price of vegetables and other food items that are easily perishable may witness slight reduction during the harvest period and then skyrocket again during the off-season period. In terms of long-term stability in adequate supply, the country lacks the capacity and this is evident from the inflationary trend over food items.

Rural Insecurity and the Food Security Question in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis

From earlier discussion, it has become obvious that Nigeria is having food security problems. However, there are different factors that are unrelated to security challenges, which contributed to the problem. For instance, there are economic factors that create inflationary challenges arising from such economic policies like deregulation and devaluation of currency, which reduce the purchasing power of citizens and affect accessibility. Again, there is the issue of bad

governance that makes it impossible for the government to manage the agricultural sector properly so as to use the abundant resources to produce adequate food for citizens. In this study, we are looking at food security challenges arising from security problems.

The menace of armed herdsmen, which affects farmlands located mainly in rural communities constitutes serious threat to agricultural production and food security. Any moment the farmer-herders crisis or clash is mentioned, what comes to mind is that the clash is related to an invasion of farmlands and destruction of crops by the pastoralists and their herd. Quarrels do not usually occur when the herdsmen are grazing their cattle in the forest areas where there are no food crops. Troubles emerge when they move into farmlands and allow their cattle to graze on crops planted by farmers or even the ones already harvested and awaiting evacuation from the farm. Videos keep surfacing online showing herdsmen that invaded farmlands with their cattle, allowing the animals to feast on the cultivated crops and ravaging the farm. This development occurs across the country. The cases that occurred in Kaduna (NAN, 2024), Ekiti (Ayeleso, 2024), Ondo (Tope, 2025) are just few examples of the challenge faced by rural farmers across the country. Some of the farmers lamented that they took loans to establish their farms but the crops were ravaged in the twinkling of an eye by herdsmen who invaded the farms with their cattle. To compound the issue, some of these farmers never receive compensation for the destruction they suffered in the hands of the herdsmen.

The impact of ravaging of farms by herdsmen on food security is glaring. The families of the farmers, who are usually poor and operate at the level of subsistence, would be faced with poverty and hunger when they lose their crops in such a manner. Those of them that took loans will be faced with more troubles because they only hoped to repay the loans after harvesting and selling the crops. Thus, they will go into debt and face the challenges of indebtedness after losing their crops. Again, bearing in mind that most of the crops destroyed are seasonal crops, it means that the farmers so affected cannot immediately start afresh to plant new seedlings, especially when the destruction occurred towards the end of the farming season. They have to wait till the subsequent planting season to start afresh, that is, if they have seedlings in reserve or could source from elsewhere. Aside from the food security challenge faced by the farmers and their immediate family, the larger society is equally affected because the crops destroyed in the farm (no matter how little) will no longer find its way into the market and contribute to the availability aspect of food security. Considering the number of farms ravaged by herdsmen per annum, the quantity of food lost over the incidents is huge to create serious impact on food availability.

The incident of destruction of farms by herders that allow their cattle to graze on farmlands and cultivated crops is pathetic. However, the farmers that only had their crops destroyed are sometimes considered lucky in Nigeria. This is to the extent that there are some other farmers who not only lost their crops to the grazing animals but equally got killed while trying to protect their crops and farms. The killing of farmers by herdsmen has almost become a normal occurrence in Nigeria. From Abia (Ademola, 2025) to Adamawa (Abdullahi, 2024), Benue (Ayeni, 2025) to Borno (Musa, 2025), Enugu (Agbo, 2025) to Ekiti (*Agency Report*, 2019), and other parts of the country, stories of how the clash between farmers and herdsmen result in deaths remain the same. Ayeni's (2025) report made it clear that herders attacks on farmers deepen food

crisis. The report equally emphasized that the attacks made farmers abandon their farms while fleeing for safety.

In the face of continued assault by herdsmen on the farmers and the seeming inability of the government to rise to the challenge of providing the farmers with security, a great number of farmers had to abandon their farms and flee for their life. A report by Yusuf (2025) revealed that within a span of two years, nearly 500,000 farmers were displaced from their homes and fields. According to Jaiyesimi (2025), 2.2 million people were displaced in seven years around the middle belt states of Nigeria alone. In most cases, the displaced farmers usually take refuge in IDP camps. Those so displaced lost their means of livelihood and began to live like the destitute in the camps, most of which have been variously reported to be in a deplorable state (Faluyi & Faluyi, 2025; Daodu, Shabu, Kile & Enefu, 2024). By not having access to their farmlands, the farmers lost the opportunity of contributing their quota towards food production and its availability. Meanwhile, there are situations where the displacement suffered by farmers are temporary. That means, the farmers fled in the face of attacks and returned after few weeks or months when the marauders had left the area and moved on. However, there are situations the herdsmen displaced the farmers and occupied the farmland, with no intention of leaving it. The situation in Enugu where numerous farm settlements were overrun by herdsmen who took them over (Sahara Reporters, 2025) serves as an example.

Aside from the activities of the herdsmen, kidnappers and other bandits equally generate security challenges and constitute threat to food security in Nigeria. Reuters (2025) presented an intelligence report, which indicated that at least 4,722 people were abducted between July 2024 and June 2025 in Zamfara State, and that the trend has made travel and farming within the area dangerous. Majority of the people abducted are rural farmers. The story is not limited to Zamfara. Cases of kidnapping are rampant in almost all the parts of the country. In *Daily Trust* (2021), the story came up on how the rural communities in Kuje, Kwali, Gwagwalada and Abaji area councils have witnessed sustained attacks by armed kidnappers, who have abducted several people and collected ransom of money, running into millions of naira, as well as food items. More often than not, residents of the areas that witness sustained attacks from kidnappers usually flee from their homes to relocate to safer zones. Punch Editorial Board (2025) drew attention to the fact that Nigeria sits on 85 million hectares of agricultural land, out of which 35 million hectares is unfarmed. Based on the incidents of rural insecurity and the consequent displacements, the size of the area considered as being farmed is being depleted steadily. Mohammed (2024) hinted that food production in the north has been dampened by a still-active jihadist insurgency whereupon formerly displaced households are too scared to cultivate beyond a narrow perimeter around garrison towns. According to him, bandits extort farmers or drive them off their land, and close roads and markets at will. Actions such as these affect not only food production but also distort the supply chain of the available food.

Indeed, rural insecurity causes serious disruption in agricultural production and affects food security adversely. Among others, it deepens poverty because agriculture is the largest employer of labour. The farmers who were displaced have been robbed of their means of livelihood. Besides, their inability to have access to their farmlands reduces the country's capacity towards

food production and food availability. As reported by Yusuf (2025), the Nigeria's Middle Belt region has witnessed a drop of over 70 per cent in farming activities, leading to shortages of maize crops, yam, and others. Considering that the region is notable for agricultural production in Nigeria, the challenge of rural insecurity appears grimmer. Meanwhile, other parts of the country face similar challenges with regard to rural insecurity and food production.

So far, the discussions have been on the challenges faced by farmers that deal on crops. But beyond that, the issue of insecurity and food security equally touches on the challenges relating to animal production/husbandry. Rural crime such as cattle rustling exists in Nigeria, especially the northern parts, and this equally affects food security. Reports of cattle thefts have been going on for years but there has been a significant increase in this criminal act, resulting in thousands of deaths, loss of property, widespread tension, and serious conflicts (Madueke, 2023; Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). Cow meat is one of the major sources of protein and dangers associated with its availability have a direct impact on nutrition in the country. Mohammed (2024) indicates that there is a spike in malnutrition in the north, which he attributes partly to the rise in cost of living and partly to insecurity. The same condition applies to almost all parts of the country.

Looking at the rural security situation in Nigeria from the lens of the theoretical framework we adopted for the study, we can see that there is a serious security vacuum in view of the security challenges facing the rural dwellers. Their fundamental freedoms that are the essence of life are not guaranteed. They are not protected from critical and pervasive threats. This explains why they are exposed to the dangers of the menacing herdsmen and bandits. Their rights to their properties (crops and farmlands) are not guaranteed. Their right to live is not guaranteed. The dual policy framework from which human security derives much of its strength, which rested on two mutually reinforcing pillars of protection and empowerment are questionable under the circumstance. Firstly, the rural dwellers and farmers lack protection. Secondly, the situation they found themselves is far from serving the purpose of empowerment. Rather, it best qualifies to be termed as disempowerment. When people take loans to cultivate crops and herdsmen destroy the crops, it amounts to destroying the lives of the farmers. Even if they did not take loans to establish the farms, the dream of every farmer is to harvest his crops and have good yields. It is from such yields and proceeds from the crops that the farmer expects to continue with the occupation in the subsequent farming season. Unfortunately, most farmers do not see such dreams and expectations fulfilled due to the security situation. From the human security perspective, one can understand what it means for a farmer to wake up one morning and find out that the crops s/he had planted, weeded, manured, tended, and preparing to harvest have been completely destroyed and the destroyer is even after her/his life. Our analytical framework is helpful in understanding the pains the displaced farmers suffer when they escape into the IDP camps and live under conditions similar to that of destitute. More importantly, it is clear that the Nigerian government is a failure in terms of human security because no matter how the country boasts about her military strength and the strength of her general security personnel, the inability to protect her citizens in the rural areas symptomizes serious security failure. This failure has a direct implication on food security because the main hub of food production in Nigeria is the rural areas. From all indications, the food security question in Nigeria cannot be resolved in the face of the rising spate of rural insecurity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We have established that Nigeria is facing the challenge of food security. We have also established its connection with rural insecurity. Despite the fact that the challenges require urgent attention, it has not received satisfactory response from the government. The dangers being faced by rural dwellers who are mostly farmers are immense. Meanwhile, the role these rural dwellers occupy in the food production chain in the country cannot be overemphasized. As major contributors to the food basket of the country, disruptions affecting affect the state of food security. These rural dwellers and farmer have been subjected to threats, attacks, and general insecurity. The attacks they face have driven many of them out of their farms and denied them access to farmlands, thereby leading to decline in food production. The decline in food production has created a situation where demands are by far higher than supply, leading to food availability challenges. Consequently, the pressure of demand over supply resulted in rise in cost of food, thereby creating accessibility challenges and exacerbating the food security problem. In the final analysis, the trend of rural insecurity is deepening poverty in the country and making the quest to attain food security seem like a mirage. The bigger problem is that there seems to be no remedy to the situation at the moment because the government intervention so far appears inadequate to stem the tide of rural insecurity or address food security concerns.

Recommendations

In the light of the above, we recommend as follows:

1. The government should rise to the challenge of addressing the challenges relating to rural insecurity. This should take the form of establishing an intelligence driven and quick response security mechanism to address security threats the moment they arise. The ability to tackle security challenges as they arise will instill confidence in the farmers and act as a deterrent to the bandits that instigate the security threats. Early warning signals must be put in place to help in detecting potential crisis areas and defuse the tension before it escalates.
2. Beyond resolving the issues that constitute physical threats, the government should equally address those ones that constitute psychological threats to the rural dwellers. Efforts should be made to ensure that the rural dwellers enjoy economic security as well. There is need to invest in infrastructural development in the rural areas to give their lives better meaning and increase their living standards.
3. The government must desist from taking actions that make it seem as if the herdsmen are receiving preferential treatments and government support to commit crimes against the farmers with impunity. Thus, the government must come out clean and prove to the people that there are no sacred cows in the administration of security justice. There is the need to either ensure that the herdsmen no longer bear arms or in the alternative, allow farmers to acquire their own arms for self-protection, that is, under the circumstance that security operatives of the state are still incapable of providing security. A situation whereby the

herdsmen brandish rifles and other weapons freely while the farmers are always put on check whenever they plan any self-defensive measure does not promote the security of the farmers. It rather emboldens the former.

4. To the extent that one of the drivers of rural insecurity is the reoccurring clashes between farmers and herders, there is need for government to establish a mechanism and policy to forestall such clashes. The minds of the herdsmen must be disabused to stop having the false sense of entitlement that they can enter other people's property and destroy it at will. They should be compelled to pay for any damages caused the farmers. Measures such as ranching and other practices that would discourage the unregulated roaming of cows from one place to another should be put in place.
5. The government should establish a mechanism for conflict resolution and encourage peacebuilding initiatives.
6. Immediate steps should be taken to restore security in the troubled areas and get the farmers that had fled their farms and communities to return and continue engaging in agricultural production. Adequate compensation should be made and support rendered to allow them get back to their feet and restore their confidence in the system.

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