



# TACKLING WIDE SPREAD HUNGER IN NIGERIA

**E**vidence of hunger across the land is mounting in daily lived experiences, and increasingly confirmed by expert reports. The latest indication of the worsening food insecurity and pervasive privation in the country comes from the United Nations World Food Programme that issued an alarming report that 24.8 million Nigerians currently face acute hunger. In response, the various governments must mobilise resources to resolve this humanitarian crisis. The WFP figure translates to one in eight Nigerians living in hunger, affecting 26 states and the Federal Capital Territory. This is a critical situation. Measures by the federal and state governments should include addressing escalating insecurity and reviving the comatose economy that are inhibiting agricultural productivity and creating food shortages. A WFP spokesperson, Chi Lael, explained that the prolonged armed conflict in the North-East was driving mass hunger and malnutrition, with millions in need of life-saving assistance and facing the risk of famine. The agency projected that Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states would witness "severe hunger" between June and August 2023, with 4.3 million people likely to be affected, and almost 600,000 "on the brink of catastrophe."

Earlier in January, UNICEF had similarly reported that 25 million Nigerians were at risk of hunger from mid-year. This represents an increase of five million from 2022, when the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation stated that 19.4 million Nigerians in 21 states faced food insecurity. Ominously, the number will continue to surge until urgent measures are taken. This should begin with making Nigeria safe. Insecurity is taking a serious toll on food production across the country: farmers are attacked by murderous bandits, insurgents, and kidnappers. Terrorists, bandits, and murderous Fulani herdsmen are raiding farms nationwide.

Last December, more than 100 farmers were abducted within three weeks across 14 communities in Niger State. The Benue State Governor, Samuel Ortom, said more than 1.5 million of the seven million residents of the state, mostly farmers, were displaced by killer herdsmen, effectively shutting down the huge contribution of the state to food security in the country. Post-harvest losses due to the country's shabby transportation system also contribute to food insecurity. Harvested crops rot on the farms before they reach the market. The Nigerian Stored Products Research Institute states that the country records about 50 per cent post-harvest losses annually. The situation is compounded by the terrible condition of the roads, most of which, according to the Federal Roads Maintenance Agency, have expired. The Federal Government in August 2022 estimated the economic cost of post-harvest losses at about N3.5 trillion annually. This fuels food inflation that according to the National Bureau of Statistics, hit 24.45 percent year-on-year in March, 7.5 percent higher than the March 2022 figure of 17.2 percent. Perennial flooding and other manifestations of climate change are also taking their toll on food production. Nigeria lost \$6.68 billion to the 2022 flooding. More than 4,400 hectares of farmland were washed away; 25 per cent of the country's rice needs were affected. The national and sub-national governments should address the farmers' lack of basic support to upgrade their production techniques to commercial quantities. Some ongoing initiatives such as the

Anchor Borrowers' Programme that provides credit to growers have been dogged by loan repayment and corruption problems. The All-Farmers Association of Nigeria complained that the scheme did not meet the expectation of boosting food production because many loan beneficiaries were not farmers. Credit provision, distribution of farm tools, implements and fertiliser is politicised and many rural farmers, who constitute the bulk of producers, are squeezed out. Governments should also address the high cost of feeds. Critical thinking must be applied to stop the increasing number of poor people in the country. The figure of 133 million Nigerians—63 percent of the population—that the NBS says are multi-dimensionally poor, is projected to rise sans effective policies.

Many youths lack jobs. A multinational consultancy, KPMG, in a newly released report tagged, 'KPMG Global Economy Outlook, H1 2023,' revealed that Nigeria's unemployment rate was at 37.7 per cent in 2022 and would rise to 40.6 per cent in 2023. The NBS rates the youth jobless rate at 53.40 percent, the world's second worst, after South Africa with 61 percent. State governments have become incurably indolent and rely on central government programmes on agriculture without developing local initiatives. Even for countries operating a unitary system of government, states/regions/provinces and local governments drive agriculture in their jurisdictions.

The incoming administration has a lot to do to guarantee food security. The 2019 World Wealth identified conflict, climate change, and a weak economy as the three main reasons for food insufficiency. Nigeria is awfully deficient on the three levels, and this explains why hunger and poverty are pervasive. Confronted with a similar problem, Brazil adopted national, state-wide, and local policies, including the Zero Hunger programme introduced in the first presidency of Inacio Lula da Silva 2003-2010 that reduced the proportion of Brazilians living in hunger by one-third, according to the FAO. The World Economic Forum reports that China has focused on supporting the 250 million smallholder farmers that produce 80 percent of the country's food, harnessing government and private sector collaboration, and anchored on technology deployment and access to low interest credit. Apart from such ventures, state governments should be the main drivers of agricultural production and initiatives backed by heavy federal support. There should be a multi-level approach to empower smallholders and also attract domestic and foreign investment in large scale mechanised farming. A revitalised rail and road system will drastically reduce the waste of agricultural produce before they get to consumers, while states and LGs should invest in rural roads, storage and processing, agricultural extension services skills acquisition.

In addition, training, mentoring and micro credit schemes for youths, women, and rural farmers to engage in farming careers should be developed by all tiers of government in partnership with the private sector, NGOs, and international aid agencies to end shortages and make the country food self-sufficient.

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