

SECURING THE INSECURED FOOD IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA – POVERTY AND INSECURITY ALBASTROSS

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of poverty and insecurity on food security in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). In spite of the abundance of diverse resources in SSA across the continent, most nations in the SSA are wallowing in abject poverty. Studies have reported a dehumanising poverty rate comprising high inflation, high costs of food prices, and economic hardship with a greater percentage of the populace living far below the poverty line on poverty index indicators. This study employed qualitative research design involving phenomenological approach in investigating the root cause of the contributory factors to food insecurity in SSA, to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of citizens as variables of the study. Purposive sampling as convenience sampling technique was employed in collecting data from different categories of citizens through Key Informant Interview on poverty, insecurity and food security issues by direct contacts and Google form circulation on social media platforms among public servants, traders, farmers, transporters, artisans, and food vendors. In all, 67 participants that consented to participate in the study (28 male and 39 female respondents) were enlisted in the study. Findings from the study revealed prevalence of food insecurity,

poverty and insecurity as drivers of food insecurity in SSA. It is therefore incumbent on stakeholders to address squarely the issue of poverty and security related issues.

Keywords: Food security; Poverty; Sub-Saharan Africa; Insecurity; Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

From the Garden of Eden in the bible to the Stone Age through the primitive and medieval period to the modern age, a common feature is food as a means to survival among humans and other organisms. In support of this view is Abraham Maslow's, a renowned psychologist, famous hierarchy of needs which prioritised food as the apex physiological need to be met followed by other needs such as safety needs, with security at the prime, and love and belonging needs, encapsulating social, system and self-actualization needs. What these underscore is the imperative of food in the society.

An express affirmation of the importance of food has been canvassed. For instance, the issue of food topped the list of the 17 goals and 16 targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to which the nations of the world are signatories (Omolewa, 2019; United Nations, 2018) as encapsulated in SDGs 2 – Zero hunger which Ojebisi (2023) summed up as the need to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition through promotion of sustainable agriculture. Expatriating further, Owoade (2023) presented a breakdown of the goals, describing SDGs-2 as a goal devoted to putting an end to hunger through achieving food security as well as improving nutrition and promotion of sustainable agriculture. A further breakdown of the goal shows access to nutritious and sufficient food all year round, especially for the poor and

disabled, ending malnutrition, doubling agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, putting in place sustainable food production systems and maintaining the genetic diversity of seeds as well as adaptation method measures as pathways to ensure the proper functioning of the food commodity market.

Succinctly put, this goal is a fertile soil on which food security can thrive especially in sub-Saharan African countries that are mostly developing nations hit by the threat of hunger and food unavailability.

Affirming the seeming importance of food availability and its linkage with poverty and sustainable development, some Yoruba axioms indicate that 'bi ebi ba tan ninu ise, ise buse' which literarily translates to dealing with hunger as a way out of poverty; 'ohun ti a o je lagba ohun ti a o se' meaning that without food, nothing can be done especially in terms of labour or work; and 'ebi kii wonu koro miran wo' that is no amount of word can assuage hunger but food (Oladiti, 2023; Oladiti et al., 2024). By implication, the achievement of the laudable goals of SDGs are expected to free the human race from the tyranny of hunger, poverty and want coupled with the need to heal and secure the planet that is capable of providing transformative steps that are tangential to shifting the world to a sustainable and resilient path (UN, 2018). This is the reason the SDGs have been described with a 'SMART' acronym

by Ojebisi (2023) to mean: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound.

As these laudable goals draw closer to the end with less than five years to the expiratory year, 2030, as indicated in the christened name, 2030 agenda or agenda 2030, it is imperative to attempt an 'on-the-spot' assessment of the status of all the 17 goals and 169 targets, especially those that are a threat to sustainable development. Basic here are the issues of poverty, climate change, sustainable economy (Adefabi, 2025), food security, threat to peace and security, healthy living, economic activities, among others.

In recognition of the significance of food security and sustainability, the World Food Day celebration in October 2025 marks 20 years of the establishment of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). This milestone will be commemorated through a year-long series of activities under the theme 'Global Collaboration for Sustainable Food Systems: Leaving No One Behind,' aligning with the United Nations' broader goals since 1945. The celebration's focus on food security, sustainability, and poverty reduction is particularly relevant to sub-Saharan Africa, where insecurity and poverty remain pressing concerns. This study explores the critical issue of securing sustainable food systems in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty and insecurity pose significant challenges as an albatross.

Statement of the Problem

In spite of the richness of Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in diverse resources distributed across the continent, earning her the moniker – 'too rich to be poor', the continent and especially a number of nations in the SSA

are wallowing in abject poverty. The reason for this destitution is not far-fetched. Studies have reported dehumanising poverty rates occasioned by increasing rate of inflation, high costs of food prices, economic hardship with greater percentage of the populace living far below poverty line in a number of poverty index indicators. The said pitiable condition manifesting in high rate of malnutrition coupled with health implications and rising costs of food products cannot be unconnected with prevalence of high level of poverty, unemployment security threat, unimpressive development index, economic downturn and all manner of hardship. These harsh conditions are obstacles to sustainable economy, growth and development, and have constituted enough hindrances to the accomplishment of a number of the SDGs. As the laudable SDGs are moving towards outliving their relevance, it becomes imperative to take another look at some of the issues germane to its attainment within the limited time left. Thus, the issue of food security — zero hunger, poverty reduction and security which are basic to sustainable growth and development — requires a re-think especially in the SSA.

Consequently, this study, among others, aims at unfolding issues affecting the accomplishment of SDGS by beaming a search light on the issues of food security, poverty and security threats. To this extent, the study is set to provide answers to questions such as: what extent is food insecurity a prevalent phenomenon in SSA? In what ways does poverty and insecurity contribute to food insecurity in SSA?

Research Questions

The following are the research questions posed for this study:

1. What extent is food insecurity a prevalent phenomenon in SSA?
2. In what ways does poverty and insecurity contribute to food insecurity in SSA?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study builds on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, a psychological theory whose basic tenet revolves round the fact that there exists, in a chronological order, different levels of human needs in order of priority (with the fulfillment of such needs following an order before human beings can reach their potentials). Abraham Maslow presented his categorisation of needs in a hierarchical order, using a pyramid which follows a bottom-top structure, with the major and most essential needs occupying the base of the pyramid starting with the most pressing needs designated physiological needs which portrays among others, food, water, shelter, sleep, sex in that order as requisite needs for survival. This is followed by safety needs in terms of requisite security and stability which includes such needs as employment, financial security, law and order, and protection from harm. At the third stage features love and belonging needs - social needs encapsulating friendship, intimacy, family and sense of belonging. This is followed by esteem needs in terms of self-esteem and recognition showcasing needs for self-respect, recognition by others, achievement and status. At the apex of the pyramid lies self-actualisation needs with respect to personal growth and fulfillment related needs

involving, among others, creativity, problem-solving, learning as well as the pursuit of passions.

Devolving from the above basic tenets of the theory, it is imperative that lower-level needs such as food, water, shelter, among others, must be prioritised above higher level needs as depicted by the position they occupy in the pyramid. Hence, the fulfillment of the basic needs of food and shelter must precede the fulfillment of the lofty needs of personal growth and self-actualisation. It needs to be reiterated that the hierarchy, as presented by Maslow, does not necessarily follow a strict linear progression as it is possible for human beings to juggle in between the various levels, either upward or downward, as the case may be. This theory which has been utilised in various fields of human endeavour is tangential to the present study and to the attainment of the SDGs as it gives room for an understanding of the way and manner in which needs can be prioritised for the purpose of developing effective and long-term strategies for combating food security threat in SSA generally. Addressing the scourge and spate of insecurity needs to be prioritised as basic measures of ensuring sustainable food production, distribution and consumption, which are basic to the attainment of zero hunger, low tolerance for poverty, security of lives and environment, and sustainable economy which are the major thrust of the SDGs.

Food Situational Analysis -Nigeria and SSA in Perspective

Tracing the etymology of food security, it was the contention of Fouilleux et al. (2017) that since the 1970s, food security is seen as a

technical problem that can be solved mainly through technical solutions like green revolution technologies or market information systems. According to Loconto (2021), by the 2010s, the issue of nutrition began to feature with food security in international forums while the technology focus shifted to nutrient deficiencies and fortification technologies. Food insecurity is mainly found among the poor and rural populations who are affected by multidimensional poverty (INIDE, 2016). Gender and age inequalities, degradation of natural resources, isolation and limited access to services also exacerbate poverty and food insecurity (Richard et al., 2022).

As earlier enunciated, food, in the hierarchy of needs among human beings, forms the base on which other human needs in Maslow's pyramid of needs are built. SSA and Nigeria are currently battling with adequate food production and consumption leading to malnutrition and health-related challenges. A hungry man is an angry man is a timely axiom here as no substantial development can be recorded in the spate of food insecurity pervading most developing nations in Africa. This by no small measure is a clog in the attainment of requisite SDGs goals and targets.

Evidence abounds on the unhealthy state of food and food systems generally in SSA. Presenting a situational analysis of food, Alli (2023) averred that Nigerian constant food-related stampedes are an indication that quite a number of citizens are hunger prone. Capturing the situation further, it was reported that Africa's most populous nation has witnessed food-related stampedes of recent, citing the Ibadan, Anambra and Abuja Christmas stampedes of 23 December, 2024 that resulted in the death of no

fewer than 50 persons. The said deaths resulted from struggles to get food, cash and clothing from organisers of charity and Christmas funfair, all as a result of the nation grappling with the worst cost of living crisis in a generation (Business Day, 23 December, 2024).

Food inflation according to Rafsanjani (2024) is a reflection of high prices of food items that predispose citizens flowing to the street and scavenging for funfair and charity events thereby highlighting the depth of hunger and deprivation in the society. Furthermore, the National Bureau of Statistics (2024) indicated that almost two-third (80%) of households face an inability to eat healthy nutrition or choice food. This trend has been attributed to hunger in a nation with over 26 million people facing acute hunger which according to the United Nation's projection will rise to 33 million people by the year 2025.

Explaining the food situation in Africa, the African Family Life Delegate Conference 2025 bemoaned the quiet desecration of African cuisine and lamented that in the name of global recognition, African kitchens have been diluted to footnotes with names that do not sing, dance nor carry the rhythm of African people. Despite the fact that the global food industry is worth over nine trillion dollars, African cuisines' diverse, rich and ancestral menus remain vastly under-leveraged where Amala is no longer Amala but yam flour paste, Akara no longer Akara but bean cake. It was therefore advocated that African food be grown, exported and globalised. Since to rename is to erase, to reclaim is to rise, African food needs to be treated in an African way by naming its own food and owning it. The Conference concluded by stating that Africa will not rise by begging for seats at other peoples' tables, hence the need to

rise through serving from African's kitchens unapologetically. The implication of the foregoing for African food production and marketing as well as food security is enormous.

In an apparent presentation of the sorry state of the food situation in Nigeria and SSA altogether, the Business Day of December 23, 2024 edition under the caption: "Nigeria's Senate seeks to criminalize corn exports to tackle hunger" affirmed that with nearly 31.8 million Nigerians already at risk of acute food insecurity, the loss of agricultural land will further deepen poverty and hunger in vulnerable communities. An express attestation to this is the issue of the double tragedy that befell the country within a spate of two weeks in June 2025. The Mokwa flood in Niger state that claimed lives, properties, farmland and food items as well as the Benne massacre by gunmen and bandits cannot but have attendant effects on food situations in the entire nations. Corroborating the foregoing, Adefabi (2025) fingered, among others, rising temperature, erratic rainfall, extreme weather events as constituting substantive threat to food security in SSA.

Poverty, Insecurity Scourge, and Food Security

Food system and food security in the SSA continue to be a mirage owing to a number of factors with multiplier effects thwarting efforts at securing food sustainability. While some micro and macro-economic variables play substantial roles in ensuring food security, a number of sociological and psychological factors tend to fuel food insecurity generally. Hence,

multi-dimensional factors tend to exacerbate food insecurity in SSA.

Poverty is said to be multi-dimensional in nature when placed against a number of indicators. Attesting to this, Olubukola (2017) enlisted low income, low level of education and health, impairment of well-being or financial difficulties, natural catastrophe, violence and crime coupled with education curtailment, voicelessness and powerlessness as key indicators of multi-dimensional poverty. This perhaps underscored the United Nations' descriptions of poverty as transcending a lack of money and useful resources for sustaining livelihood to cover starvation and malnutrition, restricted access to healthcare and other necessities, social isolation and prejudice as well as lack of involvement in decision making. This translated to more than 736 million people living below the poverty level as far back as 2015 with 10% of the world's population striving to meet the most basic needs (Abdullahi et al, 2023).

Similarly, the National Bureau of Statistics and World Bank (2022) asserted that from evidence on the profile and drivers of poverty in Nigeria, as many as 4 in 10 Nigerians live below the national poverty line with concomitant sluggish growth, low human capital, labour market weakness and exposure to shocks, holding the nation's poverty reduction jugular. Relating the situation with food sustainability, Rafiu et al (2017) identified poverty as a limitation that worsens people's purchasing power and living conditions and that manifests in characteristics such as persistent structural imbalances, slowdown in economic growth, low GDP growth and high population growth rates, underdeveloped sectors and means

of production, and depletion of natural resources coupled with limited access to consumption that falls below poverty line by a vast majority of the population, a phenomenon described by Bello (2009) as absolute poverty and not necessarily low income benchmarked against the prevailing standard of living. This perhaps explains Anosa (2025)'s description of poverty in Africa in terms of post-retirement poverty of workers, a situation where retired professors depend on children to survive. Nigerian Consumer Outlook Report 2025 also reports that less than 1% that is, 0.4% of Nigerians earn above one million monthly. The implications of the foregoing for food availability and affordability is enormous.

Berating the situation, Kolawole (2025) re-echoed the vituperations of Peter Obi, the 2023 Presidential candidate of Labour Party, on the poverty statistics of Nigeria while drawing comparison between Nigeria, Vietnam and China, and stating that more people are getting poorer in Nigeria while other nations of the world are putting their citizens out of poverty. He cited, among others, World bank's statistics which revealed nothing less than 70% of Nigerians living in rural areas as classified poor while Nigeria has the second highest number of malnourished children in the world, an indication of food insecurity enabled by poverty. In a graphical poverty data presented by Nigeria Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (2022), nothing less than 63% Nigerians representing 133 million people are multidimensionally poor. The National Manpower Index (MPI) further suggests that poor people in Nigeria experience just over 1/4 of all possible deprivations with an indication of rising poverty rate. This accounts for the conclusion of Abdullahi et al (2023) that majority of Nigerians are living in squalor with

the rising rate of poverty and concomitant security threats, cybercrime activities inclusive. Proshare (2020) earlier indicated an estimated annual financial loss of a whopping sum of ₦250 billion (\$649m) in 2017 resulting from cybercrime activities serving as the propelling force that inflicts negative economic consequences on the nation.

Situating poverty rate with overarching effects on food system and security, the National Bureau of Statistics (2024) advanced that there has been an increase in inflationary rate between 2003 and 2024 from 33.88% to 34.6% respectively. Business Day Market Survey (2024) corroborated the above when it reported that food inflation surged to 39.93% in November 2024 as against the 32.84% in November 2023 with a 50kg of local parboiled rice rising by 66% to an average of 100,000 in December 2023 while the prices of other food items such as beans, onions, crayfish also jumped by 100% within a year. Rafsanjani (2024) thus described the situation as heartbreaking and as a reflection of the severe hardship being experienced by citizens. Summing up the situation, the World Bank in the Business Day (2024) publication concluded that a struggling economy, surging inflation and declining purchasing power have thrown 127 million people under the poverty line in 2024 alone. The foregoing are but a pointer to food insecurity which cannot be severed from the endemic poverty ravaging the SSA nations thereby constituting impediment to SDGs attainment at large.

Be that as it may, food insecurity as an albatross cannot be divorced from the prevailing security challenges plaguing the continent. Lamenting on the nation's 24th democracy

anniversary, Henshaw (2024) argued that everything is crumbling in the nation with citizens holding on by the skin of their teeth, calling for justice, equity and more importantly, security of lives and property. She went on to state that in spite of over two decades of civilian rule, citizens continue to grapple with widespread insecurity, poverty and the collapse of key sectors that makes life unbearable for many. Food, despite being a basic need, is the worst victim of this prey.

Reiterating further on security and its multiplier effect, Vishwanath (2022) was of the view that conflict is spreading and intensifying across Nigeria. He therefore called for the need to implement programmes for the poor and vulnerable Nigerians, programmes that are simple and flexible with focus on limiting the risk of exacerbating fragility and conflict. Similar call was attributed to Chandhuri (2022) who posited that it is obvious that much needs to be done in assisting to lift millions of Nigerians out of poverty, including boosting health and education, bolstering productive jobs and expanding social protection. World Bank Report (2025) caps it up by emphasising the need for deep structural reforms that are guided by evidence in lifting millions of Nigerians out of poverty.

Material and Methods

The study employed qualitative research design involving phenomenological approach in getting to the root cause of the contributory factors to food insecurity in SSA as well as to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of citizens as it relates to the variables of the study. As such, convenience sampling technique was

employed in collecting data from different categories of citizens by using Key Informant Interviews (KII) bothering on poverty, insecurity and food security issues by direct contacts and Google form circulation on social media platforms among public servants, traders, farmers, transporters, artisans, food vendors, etc. In all, 67 participants that consented to participate in the study (28 male and 39 female respondents) were enlisted in the study. Triangulation of instruments formed the basis of data analysis conducted via coded description of responses under thematic analysis, using content analysis.

Results and Discussion

Presentation of results here is based on the two research questions raised for the study while the findings are organized around two primary themes emanating from the research questions in the following context.

Research Question One: What extent is food insecurity a prevalent phenomenon in SSA?

Theme 1: Prevalence of Food Insecurity in the Study Area

Findings from the study indicated pervasiveness of food insecurity in SSA as a number of indicators pointing at acute shortage of food and nutritious food were identified by participants. Among others, rising costs of food items coupled with economic hardship fuelled hunger which in turn, led to a number of social issues such as increased malnutrition, miscreants, scavengers as well as value degeneration. Food related stampedes culminating in loss of lives and permanent disabilities were itemised as

evidence of food crisis generally. Accessing nutritious food has gone beyond average citizens. This reality birthed coded formulae for eating breakfast, lunch and dinner such as skipping, replacing, and or total deprivation. Hence, eating formulas such as '0-1-1' '1-0-1' '0-1-0' are now commonplace. Natural and man-made disasters and hazards also featured as triggers for the prevalence of food insecurity. A number of health issues emanating from lack of adequate and nutritious food intake were also identified as indicators of food insecurity. Findings here are in tandem with some previous studies that identified prevalence of a number of food crisis related issues culminating in food insecurity (Adefabi, 2025; NBS, 2024; World Bank Report, 2024; Thomas et al., 2022).

Research Question Two: In what ways does poverty and insecurity contribute to food insecurity in SSA?

Theme 2: Food insecurity, Poverty and Insecurity Interplay

The result obtained in this study revealed the impact of widespread poverty and the raging security threat on food security in the study area with evidence of intertwined forces culminating in food insecurity. For instance, most of the respondents listed poverty related factors manifesting in lack of economic wherewithal to obtain food generally and nutritious food in particular as direct consequences of high inflationary rate, joblessness, weak economy translating to weak economic growth. Limited household ability to obtain sufficient food coupled with inability to produce adequate food as a result of limited capacity especially among rural dwellers are part of poverty related factors

of food insecurity. Incessant conflicts, banditry, insurgency, farmer-herders saga, communal clashes, and unsafe environment constitute security factors translating to food insecurity. Environmental hazards, natural and man-made such as drought, floods, climate change, among others were also named by respondents as responsible for food insecurity. Findings here is consistent with some previous studies that reported the ills of poverty related factors and security related factors as a food security albatross (World Bank, 2022; Adefabi, 2025; Abdullahi et al., 2023; Olubukola, 2017; Alli, 2024; Business Day, 2024; Oladiti, 2024).

Conclusion and Recommendations

A panoramic view of this study provided details of the linkage between poverty, security threat and food security in SSA with concomitant effect on the attainment of SDGs. The alarming rate of poverty has predisposed many citizens to unhealthy living and malnourishment which is against the zero tolerance for poverty enshrined in the SDGs. Similarly, the threat of security pervading the entire nation keeps on escalating on a daily basis with national dailies replete with attacks and counter attacks by insurgency, bandits as well as farmer-herders saga. These and many other variables keep on taunting the nation's food system and food security at large. As the Agenda 2030 which SDGs is commissioned for is drawing to an end, the following recommendations become pertinent:

- Addressing the issue of poverty and food insecurity is imperative.
- It is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders in addressing the monster of poverty and insecurity as a means of attaining sustainable economy, food

production, distribution and consumption.

- Environmental hazards, natural and man-made such as drought, floods, climate change need to be addressed to engender food security.
- A number of health issues resulting from lack of adequate and nutritious food intake, a reflection of food insecurity, need be nipped in the bud.

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