



ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF CONFLICT ON FOOD SECURITY IN COMMUNITIES OF BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

It is a truism that in recent years, Nigeria has witnessed several violent conflicts with its overriding effects on human lives. The country has recorded perennial conflicts in virtually all regions; ranging from ethno-religious, inter-communal, insurgency and farmers-herders confrontations. These ugly trends have resulted in food shortage and insecurity as farmers are often driven from their homes and farming communities to the more secured urban areas, hindering them from engaging in agricultural activities. This study therefore, assessed the effects of communal conflict on food security in Bonta and Ukpute communities of Benue State. The study adopted the secondary source of data, while the data analysis was carried out using Content Analysis to systematically analyze text, identify patterns and meanings. Findings from the study confirmed that communal conflict has a significant impact on food security of the two agricultural occupational communities of Benue state. Based on this finding, the study recommended improved security in conflicting communities. It also recommends the establishment of conflict mediation, resolution, reconciliation and peace building mechanisms.

Keywords: Conflict, Food Security, Communities

Introduction

The world is witnessing an increasing number of people living under conditions of food insecurity. The World Health organization (WHO) reported that 7.2 million people in East Africa are at risk of hunger in 2021, while 26.5 million are experiencing severe food insecurity. (Muriuku, Hudson & Fuad 2023). World Bank has equally reported that people experiencing food insecurity have increased from 51.5 to 59.5% in the region, with some countries exceeding 80% share of population under food security. The relation between conflict and food security underscores the intricate interplay between socio-economic factors and political dynamics. Violent conflicts have led to disruption of agricultural activities, displacement of communities and destruction of infrastructure, which can trigger and perpetuate food insecurity.

Traditionally, Northern Nigeria has been the food production basket of the country, accounting for over 70% of agricultural activity. (Akpat, 2022). According to Akpata (2022), an estimated 2.13 million people have become internally displaced from the North Eastern region and 8.7 million are now food insecure. The entire food system in the region has been affected, and this has resulted to food shortage in

Nigeria. It is evidently clear that a combination of declining food production from the conflict regions and conflict induced migration to largely consumer based urban settlements have altered the food systems. Akpata (2022) pointed out that Nigeria, which was the top producer of maize in Africa in 2021 saw a 63% increase in Maize import values in 2020. Agricultural Sector's contribution to the growth and development of the Nigeria economy is significant. As such, inadequate supplies of agricultural products will consequently lead to dearth of food securities and adverse effect on National economy

Conflicts had consumed lives and properties in Nigeria. After the civil war that claimed thousands of lives of Nigerians, the country has been faced with communal, ethno-religious, and farmers-herders conflicts. These conflicts are equally responsible for food insecurity and economic setback for communities and states where they occurred.

Benue state has experienced bloody conflicts resulting to death, destruction of properties, displacements, mutual distrust and suspicious, and human rights abuses. The prevalent pattern of conflict challenges in the state have been intra and inter communal conflicts, and farmers-herders confrontations. Bonta and Ukpute

communities had for several years been embroiled in land disputes leading to loss of lives. Since the eruption of the violent conflicts between the two communities, inhabitants have been denied fruits of development. This is due largely to fears of going freely to their farms because of unexpected attacks. People are faced with social dislocation and tension as fear and anxiety remains the general atmosphere.

Food insecurity is a major challenge as it affects people from all strata of life but the poor small-scale farmers who live in the rural areas and depend on agriculture for livelihood are often the worst hit in conflict times. They are also vulnerable to food insecurity and health consequences, one of the major challenges affecting food security violent conflict. Therefore, this study assessed the effects of conflict on food security in the two agricultural occupational communities of Benue state, Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification:

Conflict:

In every human community, conflict is inevitable. The inevitability of conflict is corroborated by Enwere (2015). He described conflict as an innate characteristics of human existence with its basic structures and dynamic behavioural patterns. Lugga, (2007) sees a conflict situation as one to which a person or group of persons get into competitive relationship where the nature of the competition hardens position to the extent that, without intervention and/or moderation violent disagreement is the result. Conflict means disagreements over contestation for resources or protection of personal or group interest. According to Francis (Cited in Best, 2012), conflict is the resort to the use of force and armed violence in the pursuit of incompatible and particular interests and goals. Oyeode (2013) succinctly captures conflicts as a state of disagreement or contest involving two or more groups.

Food Security:

Pottier (1999), sees Food Security as interconnected domains with questions of agriculture, society, environment, unemployment and income, marketing, health and nutrition, and public policy. The World Bank, (2007) further defines food security as a threefold concept. These are food availability, food

affordability and food accessibility, food available for households implies ensuring sufficient food for the households through production. The above definitions, no doubt point to at least two parts of this complex concept: access to available food and adequate nutrient intake for sustainable health. The world food summit of 1996 sees food security as a situation when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life (World Bank, 1986) Generally, food security is defined as both physical and economic access to food that meets peoples dietary needs and preferences. Access to food depends largely on market and non-market distribution mechanisms. Therefore, food production and distribution chain is often affected by violent conflicts.

Food insecurity exist when people do not have adequate physical, social or economic access to food. Ibrahim (2010) sees food security as built on 3 pillars: food availability: sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis. Food access: having sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for nutritious diet. Food use: appropriate use based on knowledge of basic nutrition and, as well as adequate water and sanitation.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that guides this study is the securitization theory. The theory derives from the ideas of Waever (1999) who sees security as a concept and a word, connected to certain social processes and where talking about something as security issue makes it security issue. Waever places emphasis on the social aspect of security, and looks at the process by which any given topic is moved from the ordinary realm of politics and define as a security matter.

Accordingly, the theoretical basis of securitization consist of three steps. The first step is the Identification of existential threats. The second step is the emergency action; and the third is effects of inter-unit relations by breaking free of rules (Buzan et al. 1998). To present an issue as an existential threat is to say that if the problem is not tackled, other things would be irrelevant. Weaver (1998) is extremely critical of framing issues in terms of security. Securitization theory is not a political statement on the part of the analyst, but the theory is instead a theoretical tool of

analysis with which the analyst can trace incidences of securitization and desecuritization.

The application of the theory to this study draws on the analytical strength of this approach which is based on its ability to situate a community at the heart of security. This implies the security and welfare of people affected by conflicts should be paramount. The nature of securitization propounded by Waeber, (2004) have been the source of many criticisms. While some are of the view that the concept of security be broadened to include more items, others are concerned that the operational effectiveness will be lost violent conflicts will result in security challenges in the area of food security. Therefore, the threat must identified, and resolved.

Overview of Conflict and Food Security in Nigeria:

Conflict has adverse effect on food security. Lin, Kafri and Leona (2022), noted that conflicts reduce availability of production input and income, and limits the variety of food eaten and the portion size of meals consumed. Food remains a critical part of every human's life. It is therefore, a global concern. In Nigeria, food insecurity has increased over the years due to violent conflicts. The Food and Agricultural organization Policy Brief (2006) data revealed that about 850 million people in the world are undernourished. Particular concern are hunger hot spots, marked by the widespread persistence and prevalence of food insecurity, especially in conflict affected areas. Conflicts are inherently violent and harmful and therefore, results to destruction of resources. The catastrophic effects of violent conflicts are unquantifiable as conflict parties may plunder an enemy's food supply, deliberately destroying farms, livestock and other infrastructure. Conflict can cause food shortages and the severe disruption of economic activities, threatening the means of survival of entire populations. Also violent conflict commonly trigger the displacement of huge numbers of people, cutting them off from their food supplies and livelihoods.

The Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (2023) estimated that 82 percent of the record 149 million Africans facing acute food security are in conflict affected countries. This underscores violent conflict as primary driven of Africa's food insecurity. The Centre equally highlighted that 8 of the 10 top African

countries experiencing acute food insecurity are facing conflict. Data between 2014 and 2016 shows that the rate of food insecurity rose by 6.6 percent. This, according to report increased to 9.3 percent between 2015 and 2017, 12.1 percent between 2016 and 2018, 14.8 percent between 2017 and 2019 and 21.4 percent between 2018 and 2020 (Babatunde – Lawal (2022). Food insecurity in Nigeria is caused majorly by conflicts, especially regions rampant with insecurity and incessant conflicts.

Conflicts have driven farmers from their homes and farming communities to the more secured urban area, hindering them from engaging in agricultural activities. The challenges of incessant conflicts in the country have impeded agricultural outputs. Farming activities cannot take place in a volatile environment. Occasional ethno-religious and communal conflicts have had devastating effect on food production. Saheed and Elegbede (2017) observed that the Boko Haram conflict in the North East has caused displacements, and reducing crop production below average. Farmlands in some parts of the Northeast have been converted to battle fields and farmers moved to camps where they have to depend on aids for survival. Food insecurity remains a challenge in Nigeria. Incessant conflicts have sent thousands to the equaled conditions across displacement camps. These Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) face untold hardship and challenges such as poor hygiene, malnutrition and inadequate meals.

Implication for Food Security

Multiple violent conflicts across Nigeria pose a threat to lives and livelihood. It equally limits access to farmlands and markets, and invariably hike the price of food items. Protracted armed conflict in Nigeria has led to the death of many civilians and sacking of farm communities which results to food insecurity. This is evident in the astronomical rise in food prices across the country. Osagie (2003) succinctly captures it that more than 65 percent of the country's (Nigerian) population is food insecure. Nigeria is ranked 103 out of 121 in the recent Global Hunger Index. The National Bureau of Statistics estimated that 133 million Nigerians are multi-dimensionally poor with food as one of the indicators (Adebiyi, 2023). The report indicated that the Northwest region of Katsina, Zamfara and Sokoto states are food insecurity and

malnutrition hotspot. Biam and Tavershima (2020) observed that about 67.8 percent active population in Benue state abandoned farming and trading activities, and moved to Makurdi which is considered relatively safe. The recurring violent conflicts between herdsmen and farmers have been a major threat to food security. Okoh, (2022) noted that 21 out of the 23 local government areas in Benue State have been hit by violent conflicts, making farming activities difficult for rural farmers in the state. He admitted conflicts have consequence on food scarcity and higher prices of food items. Incessant attacks on farmers and their farmlands in Benue state have claimed hundreds of lives and destruction of property worth hundreds of millions of naira. This sad trend has resulted in food shortage and skyrocketed prices across the state and its environs (Duru, 2021). It has equally disrupted all-season farming activities, and adversely affected food production and the economy of the state. The farm lands that normally produce a variety of cash and food crop have been deserted for fears of attacks. The dissertation of farmlands by the farmers has affected food production, and most food markets have become scanty. Consequently, these violent conflicts and attacks have affected the internally generated revenue profile of Benue state given the loss of revenue accruals from farm produce. It is obvious that conflict in Benue state have led to sharp drop in food production. Angya, cited in Duru (2021), observed the decline in food production in the state, also effects on the entire country because Benue contribute in no small measures to the food security of the country.

The communal conflicts between the Bonta community in Konshisha Local Government Area and Ukpote community in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State have adversely affected food security in the communities. These farming occupational communities have deserted their farmlands for fear of attacks. The Victims Support Fund has donated food items to 1,000 households at the Ukpote Internally Displaced Persons, IDPs camp in Oju Local Government Area as result of the Communal Conflict with neighbouring Bonta Community in Konshisha (Duru, 2022). The implication is that the farming communities have now resorted to aids for survival. The consequences of the violent conflicts is the killings on roads to their farm which has discouraged a lot of people and force them to desert their homes

and farmlands. The Benue State Emergency Management Agency, SEMA reported that about 27,000 people were displaced after the military invasion of Konshisha local government area which led to loss of several lives and destruction of properties (Aga, 2022). The communal conflict between Bonta and Ukpote resulted to the killing of 12 solders around Bonta, leading to the military invasion that disrupted normal activities. The displaced persons are predominantly farmers, thus affecting their farming activities. Conflict has a significant effect on food prices which limits access to food. Due to general insecurity in the Bonta and Ukpote axis, farmers may not feel safe going to their farms, and travelling to market. The former Benue state governor, Samuel Ortom pointed out that the violent conflict between the two agricultural occupation communities would cripple economic activities and lead to food insecurity in the country. (Hir, D. 2021).

The fact that violent conflict displaces farmers from their farm communities affects the availability of food products and invariably reduces income of farmers in developing countries. According to Ejekwonyilo (2021) Benue farmers have been under attacks by herders over land. He pointed out that herders have set many Benue communities ablaze, and destroyed some farm products. Farmers in so many local government areas of Benue state are not able to cultivate crops. So many farmers are being killed. These paint a gloomy picture of food insecurity in Nigeria. With hundreds of farmers killed, farms destroyed and many deserting homes as a result of violent conflicts, Nigeria is obviously on the verge of food insecurity. Benue state, with the sobriquet 'food basket of the nation', is in the eye of the storm as herdsmen and farmers struggle over lands. Akinloye (2017) noted that there is nowhere in the world where farmers have been killed in great numbers as Benue. He asserts that in 2014, the destructions recorded across 10 local governments in Benue state exceeded 95 billion naira. Apart from the losses, violent conflicts brought fears of going to farm and food shortage.

The reduction in the expected annual output from the rural farmers entails food insufficiency which consequently results to higher cost of food products. It is therefore obvious that food affordability, availability and accessibility is a huge challenge in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study on assessing the effects of conflict on food security in communities of Benue state interrogated the violent conflict between Bonta and Ukpute communities, and its implication on food security in the state. It is clear from the study that violent conflict remains one of the significant drivers affecting food security in Nigeria. Violent conflict can both directly and indirectly impact food security. When crops or agricultural lands are destroyed by bloody conflicts, it can have an impact on people's access to food.

Haven x-rayed the extent to which violent conflicts continue to engendering community relationship in Nigeria vis-à-vis the implication on food security, it is instructive that the Nigerian state map out effective strategies to ensure that the provision of sustainable peace and conflict resolution mechanisms are prioritized. In focusing on building peace in the two agricultural occupational communities, local food production and access would be boosted.

The federal and state governments should as a matter of priority strengthen security arrangements for conflicting communities. This will require that government and security agencies sustain campaign against violent conflicts, improve early warning systems, maintains operational readiness of the police and other security units, encourage communication and collaboration with local authorities. The government should also tighten control of production,

circulation and possession of illicit firearms and ammunition especially automatic rifles. It is equally important to strengthen cross border co-operation with neighbouring countries security forces. This will go a long way in reducing conflicts.

The Institute for Peace and conflict Resolution (IPCR), the federal government agency with the mandate to deal on issues of peace, conflict management and resolution in Nigeria and Africa be encouraged and well-funded to carry out such activities as peace building, management and resolution. The IPCR should establish conflict, Mediation, resolution, reconciliation and peace building mechanisms at state and local government levels.

There should be review of legislation on land, land use, land control and development to recognize the rights of rightful owners of land.

All states of the federation should establish agencies of peace and conflict resolution to deal on peace and conflict issues. That will encourage community people to adequately understand the benefits of peaceful coexistence.

The traditional institutions in the country should be strengthened to handle community issues. The involvement of critical stakeholders and traditional rulers helps in community peace enlightenment and minimizes violent conflict in conflicting communities.

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