

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustaining Fight against Hunger, Poverty, and Food Insecurity: A Panacea to Youth Restiveness in Nigeria

J. C. Udemezue¹, C. S. Onwusiribe¹, C. I. Mbanaso², C. U. Onwusiribe¹, C. Mbanaso²

¹National Root Crops Research Institute, Umudike, Nigeria, ²Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension, Abia State University, Umudike, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture remains the cornerstone of Nigeria's economy, employing over 38% of the population and contributing significantly to the nation's gross domestic product. However, the sector's potential has been undermined by policy inconsistencies, over-reliance on oil, and declining youth participation. This paper examines the intricate relationship among youth restiveness, agricultural decline, and food insecurity in Nigeria. Drawing from secondary data, it establishes that youth unemployment, poverty, poor governance, and marginalization are key drivers of restiveness, which in turn disrupts agricultural productivity and national food security. The analysis also reveals that food crises in Nigeria are intensified by economic shocks, inflation, and weak agricultural infrastructure. The paper argues that sustainable food security can serve as a panacea to youth restiveness by providing employment, improving livelihoods, and fostering social stability. It concludes that achieving food security requires robust investment in agriculture, effective youth empowerment policies, and coordinated government interventions aimed at addressing poverty, hunger, and unemployment.

Key words: Agricultural development, food security, national development, poverty and unemployment, youth restiveness

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture remains the most crucial sector in Nigeria's economy, employing about 38.0% of the population and contributing approximately 23.1% to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP). The sector recorded a 4.88% growth in the third quarter of 2016, reaching as high as 13% in earlier years – an indication of its vast but underutilized potential. However, its progress has been hindered by inconsistencies and policy fluctuations arising from successive government reforms, programs, and agendas (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2017; Ashaye *et al.*, 2019). Over time, the sector's performance

in international trade has declined and stagnated, resulting in the loss of its dominance in the export of key agricultural commodities. The shift from agriculture to crude oil and gas exploration in the late 1960s redirected the nation's growth trajectory toward oil-driven consumption. Consequently, the current structure of Nigeria's economy is heavily reliant on the importation of goods (FRN, 2017). Globally, one of the greatest challenges remains eradicating hunger and alleviating poverty – issues most prevalent in developing nations where many people suffer from inadequate food and nourishment (Ashaye *et al.*, 2019). Agriculture continues to be vital for the livelihood of rural populations and plays a central role in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. It drives economic growth by reducing poverty and ensuring food security, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Udemezue *et al.*,

Address for correspondence:

J. C. Udemezue

E-mail: udemezuej@gmail.com

2023). Despite its potential for sustainable growth, Nigeria's agricultural sector has suffered from low productivity due to overdependence on oil revenues and imported food. During the 1960s and 1970s, agriculture not only provided sufficient food for the Nigerian populace but also contributed the largest share to the GDP (Ashaye *et al.*, 2019). At that time, a variety of food and cash crops were exported from Nigeria; however, today, the country depends heavily on imported food to feed its growing population.

Youth represents a transitional phase from childhood dependency to adult independence, where individuals recognize the need to collaborate with others for the achievement of societal goals (United Nations Youth, 2019). The increasing youth population in Nigeria has led to high unemployment and dependency rates. The energy, strength, and creativity of young people are vital assets for a functional society, as their positive contributions foster community growth and development. Youths play multiple roles such as maintaining law and order, preserving culture, promoting education, engaging in agriculture, participating in politics, initiating development projects, organizing cultural festivals, taking part in sports, and engaging in traditional ceremonies such as marriages and funerals (Akpokighe and Ejovi, 2020).

Youths are essential stakeholders in any society and play a pivotal role in ensuring the sustainability of agricultural development. As the backbone of the agricultural workforce, they are indispensable for maintaining food security. However, global population growth, declining agricultural productivity, and increasing rural-to-urban migration among youths threaten sustainable food production. Young farmers are thus crucial for future food security, yet they face numerous challenges that may discourage their involvement in agriculture and other social responsibilities (Anyim and Odoemelum, 2016).

In this context, youth restiveness can be described as the unwillingness of young people to conform to societal norms due to dissatisfaction with their socioeconomic circumstances. Research indicates that over two million Nigerian youths are unemployed, having lost hope, faith, and dignity. As a reaction to these conditions, many have become restless, placing the country among those

most severely affected by poverty (Anyim and Odoemelum, 2016). Restiveness among youths diminishes their capacity to solve problems and fulfill responsibilities effectively, thus undermining societal goals (Akpokighe and Ejovi, 2022). Studies suggest that perceived victimization resulting from economic exploitation can contribute to youth restiveness. In modern society, factors such as resource scarcity, unequal wealth distribution, marginalization, poor governance, lack of quality education, and high unemployment rates have exacerbated youth frustration (Akpokighe and Ejovi, 2022). When youths become dissatisfied, it often leads to chaos, destruction of lives and property, and disruption of social order. Such behaviors, although stemming from legitimate grievances, are often criminalized due to their violent nature (Nsidibe *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, youth restiveness poses serious threats to societal stability and can directly undermine agricultural productivity, leading to food insecurity.

Food security refers to a condition where all individuals consistently have physical and economic access to adequate, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences for a healthy life (Waheed and Adepeju, 2022). It encompasses four key pillars: Availability, access, utilization, and stability (Udemezue *et al.*, 2023). Essentially, food security ensures that all people, at all times, have access to sufficient and nutritious food. Its three major dimensions include a safe and nutritionally adequate food supply at both national and household levels, stability of supply across time, and equitable access to food for all households (Waheed and Adepeju, 2022). Conversely, food insecurity arises when individuals lack adequate food intake to sustain productivity and a healthy life. It represents the denial of choice, opportunity, and the right to a dignified standard of living (Waheed and Adepeju, 2022; Udemezue *et al.*, 2023).

This paper assesses Nigeria's pursuit of food security and identifies youth restiveness as a significant obstacle to achieving it. The destructive consequences of youth unrest are fundamentally opposed to agricultural productivity, thereby exacerbating food shortages and deepening the nation's food insecurity crisis. The study utilizes secondary data to analyze sustainable strategies for

combating hunger, poverty, and food insecurity as a means to address youth restiveness in Nigeria.

THE FOOD CRISIS IN NIGERIA: CAUSES, IMPACTS, AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Nigeria is currently facing an unprecedented food crisis marked by soaring food inflation and a sharp rise in the number of food-insecure citizens (The Nigerian Economic Summit Group, 2024). This worsening situation has also been linked to growing youth protests against the current government. The Federal Government has identified the core challenges as those of affordability, accessibility, and availability of food for both local consumption and export.

Affordability remains a major concern. Escalating inflation, high interest and exchange rates, and increased business costs have made food unaffordable for many Nigerians, forcing households to spend a significant portion of their income on coping mechanisms. Between 2009 and 2023, the cost of living tripled across basic and luxury goods (The Nigerian Economic Summit Group, 2024).

From 2019 to 2022, food inflation was driven by exchange rate fluctuations, trade restrictions, and border closures, which were further aggravated by COVID-19 and global conflicts, resulting in hyperinflation of imported goods. In 2023, the Central Bank of Nigeria's demonetization policy, fuel subsidy removal, and unification of the foreign exchange regime exacerbated inflationary pressures. Consequently, business productivity declined, and household welfare worsened. By December 2023, inflation had peaked at 28.9%, with an annual average of 24.5%, pushing approximately 14 million Nigerians into poverty due to eroded purchasing power (The Nigerian Economic Summit Group, 2024).

Food insecurity surged dramatically, from 28 million people before COVID-19 to over 100 million by 2024. Food inflation rose to 35.41% in January 2024, up from 33.9% in December 2023. This indicates that food-insecure Nigerians increased from 66.2 million in Q1 2023 to 100 million in Q1 2024 (WFP, 2024). Among them, 18.6 million faced acute hunger, whereas 43.7 million were coping with crisis-level or worse hunger conditions as of

March 2024. This severe crisis calls for immediate humanitarian aid, social protection measures, and food systems reform to avert potential social unrest and youth agitation.

In terms of availability, agricultural productivity in 2023 declined despite government interventions, deepening the cycle of hunger and poverty. During the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity rose from 28 million to 36.5 million by June 2020 due to lockdown-induced disruptions in the national food system. Even before that, food demand consistently outstripped supply. Between September 2020 and September 2022, the number of food-insecure Nigerians increased from 39.9 million to 55.8 million. In addition, 36.8% of children under five were chronically malnourished, whereas 6.8% suffered acute malnutrition (World Food Program, 2022). These figures highlight a persistent systemic deficit in Nigeria's food system, which has remained vulnerable to both internal and external shocks (NESG, 2024).

Historical data from 2016 revealed a persistent gap between food demand and agricultural productivity. The Russia-Ukraine war in 24th February, 2022 further intensified imported inflation. The conflict drove global food prices up by 23% – the steepest increase in two decades – and disrupted fertilizer supplies, pushing prices of urea and potash up by 22% and 34%, respectively, between February and March 2022. This reduced agricultural output in 2022. Similarly, global wheat and maize prices rose by 4.35% and 10.62%, respectively, between late 2021 and early 2022, further inflating food and animal feed costs (NESG, 2024).

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the global population is expected to reach 9.1 billion by 2050. To meet this demand, food production must increase by 70%. For Africa – projected to have around 2 billion people by then – agricultural productivity must grow faster than the global average to prevent widespread hunger and food insecurity (Ashaye *et al.*, 2019).

Food insecurity, defined as limited access to adequate and nutritious food due to poverty, can provoke negative behavioral and social outcomes. Extreme hunger and deprivation can lead to psychological vulnerability and social unrest. The relative deprivation theory explains that when individuals perceive a gap between what they have

and what they believe they deserve, feelings of injustice may lead to agitation and violence (Etim *et al.*, 2017). Hence, the UN, FAO, and other global organizations continue to emphasize the importance of ensuring adequate food supply as a foundation for world peace.

From a Marxist perspective, society is divided into two classes – the rich and the poor. When government policies favor the elite while neglecting the poor, deprivation of basic needs such as food and a decent standard of living may fuel violent reactions. Poverty itself is not violence, but creates fertile ground for it. A person plagued by hunger may resort to desperate measures to survive or retaliate against perceived inequality. Thus, ensuring access to basic amenities, nutritious food, clean water, and other necessities is crucial to reducing youth restiveness and promoting social stability (Etim *et al.*, 2017).

Deprivation, therefore, constitutes a violation of human rights. More than 500 million people globally struggle to meet basic daily needs, most of whom live in rural areas dependent on agriculture for survival (Obiefuna and Isiekwene, 2019). Poverty, hunger, and malnutrition are key drivers of rural-to-urban migration in developing countries, posing serious challenges to rural development. These issues also threaten global peace, as hunger often fuels conflict when combined with unmet development goals (Obiefuna and Isiekwene, 2019). As the saying goes, “a hungry man is an angry man.” Hence, food insecurity remains a major obstacle to national development.

REPOSITIONING FOOD SECURITY AS A PANACEA TO FOOD CRISIS IN NIGERIA

The persistent food crisis in Nigeria can be attributed to the government’s inadequate efforts in poverty reduction, insufficient income generation, and unequal distribution of resources needed to meet household needs. This challenge can be effectively addressed by revitalizing the nation’s agricultural sector. Ensuring the full and equal participation of both men and women in agriculture is crucial to achieving sustainable food security for all (FAO, 2004, cited in Obiefuna and Isiekwene, 2019). Thus, the responsibility for attaining food security ultimately lies with individual governments across

the world. The key determinants of food security vary across African countries due to differing historical backgrounds, agro-ecological conditions, economic structures, and institutional frameworks. As a result, a universal policy approach cannot adequately address food crises in every nation. However, one important truth remains – all African countries can achieve food security if their governments demonstrate a strong and consistent commitment. To improve food security, governments must address several critical areas:

Investment in the Agricultural Sector

Food insecurity in Nigeria largely stems from an underdeveloped agricultural system characterized by dependence on primary agriculture, low soil fertility, limited use of modern inputs, environmental degradation, and significant post-harvest losses. In addition, inadequate storage and preservation facilities cause high price fluctuations. Since agriculture serves as a vital income source for rural households, there is an urgent need to strengthen agricultural productivity through investment and modernization.

Ensuring Access to Sufficient Food Supplies

Achieving food security requires policies that sustain broad-based economic growth. Research indicates that ending hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2050 would require an annual per capita GDP growth rate of about 2.5%. Therefore, governments must promote access to adequate food production and processing. Increased production of both food and non-food crops contributes significantly to the national economy, benefiting rural and urban populations alike.

Implementing Direct Nutrition Interventions

Targeted nutrition programs for individuals suffering from acute hunger and malnutrition are essential. Providing nutritional information and supplements to women of childbearing age and young children helps build human capital, promote economic growth, and enhance living standards. Improved agricultural productivity raises farmers’

incomes while reducing food prices, thus boosting overall nutrition security.

Promoting Indigenous and Locally Led Initiatives

Locally designed and implemented initiatives have proven highly effective in enhancing food and nutrition security. National governments should provide policy direction, allocate resources, and offer institutional support to empower local efforts and ensure their success.

Addressing Ethnic and Religious Conflicts

Ethnic and religious conflicts, which often result in loss of lives, destruction of crops, and displacement of farmers, must be resolved. Political leaders should demonstrate the will and patriotism necessary to tackle these human-induced crises. Restoring peace and stability will rebuild citizens' confidence in agriculture and boost food production.

Mitigating Natural Disasters

Natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and pest infestations pose serious threats to food security. Governments must proactively monitor, investigate, and manage these occurrences to prevent large-scale hunger and starvation.

Rebranding and Overhauling Nigeria's Systems

Nigeria's challenges are not insurmountable, as the country possesses abundant resources to rebuild itself. According to Otana (2013, cited in Obiefuna and Isiekwene, 2019), a new generation of visionary leaders is needed – leaders who believe in Nigeria's potential and are committed to steering the nation toward self-reliance in collaboration with genuine partners. The nation's stagnation is partly due to misplaced priorities and a lack of collective effort. Many aspire for progress without contributing meaningfully, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

CAUSES OF YOUTH RESTIVENESS

To be restive means to be unable to remain calm or to resist control, often due to dissatisfaction with decisions, policies, or laws deemed unfavorable. Youth restiveness refers to a pattern of behaviors, actions, and attitudes that deviate from societal norms and reflect discontent among young people. It has become a strategy through which youths attempt to compel authorities to address their grievances. Young people are naturally energetic, and when this energy is properly directed, it leads to creativity, productivity, and contributions to national development. However, when it is misdirected, it often manifests as restiveness and social disorder (Ezebuilo, 2023).

Several factors contribute to youth restiveness, ranging from personal and societal issues – such as marginalization and unemployment – to political manipulation, where politicians recruit young people to fight their opponents. Snapps *et al.* (2011), as cited in Ezebuilo (2023), identified economic, political, and sociocultural elements as key drivers of restiveness in their study of youth unrest and industrial disruption in the Niger Delta. Similarly, Ofem and Ajayi (2008), cited in Ezebuilo (2023), noted that poor social welfare, lack of good governance, corruption, inadequate training programs, joblessness, insufficient recreational opportunities, and poor-quality education all fuel youth agitation. Collectively, these studies show that a range of interrelated issues contribute to persistent youth restiveness.

Bad Governance and Leadership

Effective leadership and good governance are crucial for any nation's progress. Unfortunately, Nigeria has struggled with poor governance, resulting in inconsistent development. Onyekpe (2007), cited in Ezebuilo (2023), observed that successive governments have failed to prioritize youth needs, with limited resources allocated to them often being diverted for personal gain. When young people witness such corruption and neglect, frustration and agitation are inevitable.

Unemployment

Unemployment remains a major challenge, particularly among young people in developing nations. Research indicates that youth unemployment rates are nearly double official estimates. Many Nigerian youths are trapped in joblessness, which undermines nation-building. The lack of employment opportunities not only fuels frustration but also promotes restiveness with potentially severe social consequences (Ezebuilo, 2023).

Poverty

Poverty reflects inequality and social injustice, both of which devastate individuals and communities. Over 70% of Nigerians live in abject poverty, with many surviving on <1 U.S. dollar/day. Urban youths often resort to petty trading – selling small items such as bottled water or handkerchiefs – with minimal profit. This economic hardship links poverty to social discontent, inequality, and restiveness, as seen in frequent youth-led protests against authorities.

Marginalization

Perceived exclusion from equitable resource distribution also provokes youth agitation. When community leaders neglect their needs, young people may resort to violence to draw attention to their situation.

Absence of Youth-Oriented Policies

The growing rate of youth restiveness in Nigeria indicates a lack of effective youth development policies. The absence of strong governance frameworks has caused widespread decline across sectors. Consequently, the future appears uncertain for many young Nigerians. Anger (2006), as cited in Ezebuilo (2023), stressed the need for government at all levels to establish youth empowerment agencies focused on holistic development to counter this trend.

Peer Group Influence

Peer groups – individuals of similar age and social standing – exert significant influence on

behavior. Such groups share norms and values that members strive to emulate. However, when these groups originate from violent or dysfunctional backgrounds, negative behaviors can spread among members. Youths who lack parental guidance often find belonging in peer groups, which may encourage deviant acts.

Poor Standard of Living

A low standard of living is another driver of restiveness. The Nigerian adage, “a hungry man is an angry man,” captures this reality. When individuals struggle to afford food, shelter, or clothing, frustration sets in. According to Akpokighe and Ejovi (2020), poverty, unemployment, and social inequality collectively heighten youth aggression. Some youths, in search of quick financial gains, turn to internet fraud, kidnapping, and ritual crimes, worsening insecurity nationwide.

Inadequate Education

Education is the foundation for national development and stability. Unfortunately, Nigeria’s educational system suffers from inadequate infrastructure, poorly trained teachers, and limited access, particularly in rural areas. Financial hardship prevents many youths from completing their studies. As WordPress (2014) emphasized, quality education is directly linked to national prestige and unity; it shapes young citizens’ patriotism and capacity for meaningful contribution.

Poor Infrastructure

Nigeria’s inadequate infrastructure – resulting from mismanagement, corruption, and unequal resource distribution – also contributes to youth restiveness. Deficiencies in education, clean water, electricity, roads, and healthcare facilities foster frustration and protest among young people.

Lack of Information

Access to accurate information is essential for sound decision-making. Misinformation or lack of communication can incite violence and confusion. Hidon and Ahiauzu (2005), as cited in Akpokighe

and Ejovi (2020), found that limited information flow in the Niger Delta contributed to youth unrest. Leaders must therefore communicate transparently, as misinformation can provoke unrest and hinder peacebuilding.

POSSIBLE WAYS TO REDUCE YOUTH RESTIVENESS AND POVERTY IN NIGERIA

Curbing youth restiveness is crucial for national development and unity. Peace and stability are essential for the progress of any nation; therefore, addressing the causes of youth unrest is vital. According to Akpokighe and Ejovi (2020), the following measures can help mitigate youth restiveness and poverty in Nigeria:

Favorable Government Policies

Government policies should be inclusive and people-oriented, giving citizens, especially the youth, a sense of belonging. By creating supportive environments and ensuring fair treatment, youth restiveness and related social vices can be minimized. When the government responds to the needs and interests of the population, national peace, growth, and development are more likely to thrive.

Creation of Job Opportunities

Employment provides youths with a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Both the government and private individuals should invest in ventures that promote job creation. The government should also establish functional economic structures to support employment generation. Promoting indigenous industries and encouraging local production will not only create jobs for young people but also boost national revenue.

Improved Standard of Living

A good standard of living enhances economic development. When people can meet their basic needs – such as food, clothing, and shelter – they are more likely to live fulfilled lives. To achieve this, government efforts must focus on reducing poverty

and implementing effective structural programs that ensure a better quality of life for all citizens.

Strengthened Educational System

Improving the quality of education is vital in combating youth restiveness. Nigeria needs well-equipped educational facilities and adequate learning materials at all levels. Education at the primary and secondary levels should be free, whereas university fees should be made affordable. These measures will increase school enrollment, reduce illiteracy, and empower youths with knowledge and skills.

Development of Infrastructural Facilities

Nigeria must invest significantly in infrastructure. Essential amenities such as good roads, clean water, reliable electricity, quality healthcare, and functional educational facilities should be made accessible to all. Adequate infrastructure contributes to improved living conditions and reduces frustration and restiveness among the youth.

Proper Information Dissemination

Effective communication and access to accurate information are essential for guiding public behavior. Information influences people's attitudes – positively or negatively. Therefore, proper communication channels should be established to educate youths on political, economic, social, educational, and health-related issues. This helps them make informed decisions and understand that their choices shape their future. Importantly, such enlightenment should be provided proactively, not when the youth are already frustrated or deprived.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that food insecurity and youth restiveness are mutually reinforcing challenges that hinder Nigeria's socioeconomic development. Youths, being the backbone of agricultural productivity, have been alienated due to unemployment, poverty, and poor access to productive resources. Their dissatisfaction and idleness often manifest as restiveness, protests, and

violence, which in turn worsen food production and national insecurity. The findings underscore that the current food crisis in Nigeria is both an agricultural and sociopolitical issue driven by neglect of the rural sector, weak governance, and inadequate social protection mechanisms. Sustainable food security, if properly repositioned, can act as an antidote to youth restiveness by creating employment, improving nutrition, and reducing poverty. Therefore, the path to peace and national development lies in revitalizing agriculture, empowering youths, and ensuring equitable distribution of resources.

Recommendations

1. Investment in agriculture: The government should prioritize massive investment in the agricultural sector through mechanization, irrigation, and access to credit facilities for smallholder and youth farmers.
2. Youth empowerment programs: Establish structured youth empowerment schemes focused on agribusiness training, entrepreneurship, and employment creation to channel youthful energy into productive ventures.
3. Improved governance and policy consistency: Policies on food production and agricultural development should be stable, transparent, and inclusive to sustain progress and build trust among citizens.
4. Enhanced education and skill development: Revitalize the educational system by integrating agricultural and vocational studies to prepare youths for self-reliant and productive engagement.
5. Address poverty and inequality: Implement poverty reduction strategies, social protection programs, and equitable resource distribution to reduce deprivation, which fuels youth frustration and restiveness.
6. Conflict resolution and security: Address ethnic, religious, and resource-based conflicts that displace farmers and disrupt agricultural activities, ensuring a peaceful environment for production.
7. Improved infrastructure and market access: Develop rural infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and storage facilities to enhance agricultural productivity and reduce post-harvest losses.

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