



# **‘Boko Haram is Losing, But so is Food Production’: Conflict and Food Insecurity in Nigeria and Cameroon**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the chronic food insecurity in parts of Nigeria and Cameroon as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency. This insurgency became active in 2009 and has decimated whole communities, destroyed food crops, killed cattle and forced farmers to flee to protective camps. Many now rely on food aid from international organizations. As Nigeria and its neighbours try to contain the insurgents, a bigger problem has been created or further compounded: that of food insecurity, which has ramifications beyond national borders. Markets have been closed and custom duties have dwindled. This article assesses the ongoing situation.

## **Résumé**

Cet article examine l'insécurité alimentaire chronique dans certaines régions du Nigeria et du Cameroun, résultat de l'insurrection Boko Haram. Cette insurrection est devenue active en 2009 et depuis lors, a décimé des communautés entières, détruit des cultures vivrières, tué des bétails et a obligé les agriculteurs à fuir dans des camps de protection. Beaucoup d'entre eux vivent maintenant de l'aide alimentaire des organisations internationales. Alors que le Nigeria et ses voisins tentent de contenir les insurgés, un problème plus important a été créé ou aggravé, celui de l'insécurité alimentaire, qui a des ramifications au-delà des frontières nationales. Les marchés ont été fermés et les droits de douane ont diminués. Cet article évalue la situation en cours.

## **Introduction**

Insurgency or conflict the world over has taken a heavy toll on the quality and quantity of food that people require for nourishment (Onwusiribe et

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al. 2015:217). The African continent is riddled with conflicts of various kinds. These conflicts include election disputes, resource and environmental challenges, civil wars, armed insurgency, religious intolerance, ethnic friction, community and boundary conflicts between countries (Matthews 1970; Wood 1993; Obi 1999; Idowu 1999; Blanton et al. 2001; Adejumbi 2001; Rwantabagu 2001; Ukiwo 2003; Agbu 2004; Gahama 2005–2006; Moritz 2006; Ibaba 2007, 2011; Ayai 2009; Allen and Okeke-Uzodike 2010; Alozieuwa 2010; Amungwa 2011; Uhunmwuango 2011; Ezzine de Blas et al. 2011; Bere 2011; Christakis 2013; Pate 2014). Some of these conflicts have sadly led to a massive loss of lives and property and to environmental destruction with dire consequences for agricultural production and food shortages. The severe food crisis or insecurity in several parts of the continent is partly due to these very costly wars, the transformation of agricultural lands for other uses, global environmental changes, degradation of agricultural soil, erosion of the genetic base of agricultural biodiversity, water scarcity, poor governance, growing demand and changes in consumption patterns, uncontrolled deforestation, export-oriented agricultural development policies and political malfunctions within and between countries (Paarlberg 1999; Gebre 2002; Cameroon Country Report 2010; Yengoh et al. 2010:6; UN 2011; Epule *et al.* 2012; Ngoh 2013; Hemen 2013; Dubagat 2013).

Nigeria has experienced ethnic and religious conflicts since independence from Britain in 1960. Among these conflicts were the civil war that rocked the foundations of the country between 1967 and 1970. Memories of the destructive effects of the war led to the formation of pressure groups in the Eastern Region of Nigeria such as the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). These groups are demanding sovereign statehood for the Igbos, one of the predominant ethnic groups of Nigeria, and other groups in eastern Nigeria. They have questioned the continuous existence of the Federation in preference for a new state which their forefathers fought for between 1967 and 1970. The Niger Delta region has experienced environmental conflict, and the rise of militant groups in this region have challenged the authority of the Nigerian government to control the area. Other groups within the Yoruba ethnic group and in the northern part of Nigeria are clamouring for greater autonomy from within the Federation of Nigeria.

Beyond the demands of these pressures groups from different parts of Nigeria, the country also went through several military take-overs between the 1970s and early 1990s which destabilized and made the country insecure. During the oil boom of the 1970s, the Nigerian military juntas were more concerned with political power than giving attention to the

development of the agricultural sector. It was not until the 1980s, following the Structural Adjustment Programme of 1986, that the government decided to revamp the agricultural sector (Okojie 1991:33). After a spell of military dictatorship, this colossus of Africa reverted from 1999 to the institutionalization of a democratic culture. In spite of this change in the governmental system, corruption remains a hydra of Nigeria's political economy. President Muhammadu Buhari has promised to tackle this head on since coming to power in 2015. This notwithstanding, the changing climatic conditions, fratricidal farmer–herder conflicts in Nigeria and the Boko Haram insurgency that began in 2009 in north-eastern Nigeria have negatively impacted on agricultural productivity and distribution networks from the north to the southern part of the country and vice versa (Eme *et al.* 2014).

For its part, Cameroon has been a relatively peaceful country since independence and reunification in 1960/61. This ended however in the second decade of the twenty-first century when peace was threatened by the cross-border incursions of Boko Haram and the warring parties in the Central African Republic (CAR). Prior to the independence of French Cameroon on 1 January 1960 and the reunification of British Southern Cameroons with the Republic of Cameroon on 1 October 1961, there was internal conflict between rival nationalist groups and parties. The Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), which was formed by radical trade unionists in 1948, embarked on a virulent attack of state institutions as members clamoured for the immediate independence and reunification of Cameroon which was partitioned after the defeat of Germany following the First World War, 1914 to 1916. The UPC's radical stance led to an internal insurrection, but the French colonial government and Premier Ahmadou Ahidjo suppressed this through force, destruction of property and loss of lives. The nationalists who fought for true independence and reunification for Cameroon, free from neo-colonial strings, such as Reuben Um Nyobe, Ernest Ouandie and Felix Roland Moumie were branded as terrorists by the colonial authorities in both British Southern and French Cameroon and were eventually eliminated. The country remained relatively peaceful and stable after independence and reunification until the coup d'état on 6 April 1984 against the government of President Paul Biya, successor of President Ahmadou Ahidjo who had resigned on 4 November 1982 and handed the mantle of leadership to the former two days later. This failed coup led to tension between northerners and the ruling Ewondo–Bulu–Fang ethnic groups of the Centre–South. Several political leaders from the north were eliminated and troubled peace was restored to the country.

The greatest threat to peace and stability in Cameroon came in 2012 due to political instability in CAR following the ousting of President Francois Bozizé from power (Kah 2013). His overthrow and escape to Cameroon, and the ensuing tussle for power between the predominantly Muslim *Séléka* rebels and the mostly Christian and non-Christian anti-*balaka* groups, led to an overflow of refugees from CAR into the East Region of Cameroon. The influx of refugees from CAR into the East Region has since then posed a serious problem to food security for the population of this region and the refugees. Cross-border incursions from warring groups in CAR have affected agricultural activities. The result has been food shortages. Besides, the Boko Haram insurgency spilled over into Cameroon and compounded already existing agricultural and food security problems in 2013. One of the largest camps for refugees in the northern part of Cameroon is at Minawao. This camp harbours over 325,000 people displaced within Cameroon as well as others from Nigeria (Mbom 2016) and there is limited food for this teeming population.

### **Conceptualizing and Contextualising Food (In)Security**

Food (in)security has been defined in different but complementary ways. The World Bank defined food security as a condition where everyone has access to sufficient food to live a healthy and productive life (World Bank 1986). The Africa Bureau of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID 2015) defines it as a situation when everyone has physical, social and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs, produce and stay healthy. In fact, food security is when there is food sufficiency with no hunger or fear of starvation. Several indicators are associated with food security. These include availability, access, adequate utilization and stability of food supply at all times (Dubagat 2013). A short-term definition of food security for any country or the entire globe is the ability of food-deficit countries or households within countries to meet target consumption levels on a yearly basis (Salih 1994:4). Mung'ogong'o (2002) defines food security from the perspective of the people of the Shinyanga Rural District in Tanzania. The people argue that a food-secure household is one with enough maize, bulrush millet or sorghum in store that would last for a year. It also means that a household with enough money, livestock or other assets to buy food is food-secure. Food insecurity for its part is caused by land shortage, lack of water, incessant drought, lack of farm credit, destructive birds, poor cultivation techniques, decreasing soil productivity, lack of reliable markets for crops and livestock, and misuse of available food among other factors.

When these conditions are non-existent or inadequate, a people are food-insecure. Food insecurity therefore results when not everyone has access to sufficient food to live a healthy and productive life or when they cannot meet target consumption levels yearly. The emphasis here is on access to sufficient food for a healthy and productive life that is free from hunger and the fear of starvation. People without physical, social and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs to enable them to produce and stay healthy suffer from food scarcity and insecurity. When people have food but of insufficient quantity and quality, they are still food-insecure. The mere availability of food does not guarantee food security except when it is of adequate quantity and quality. When food supply is unstable and unreliable for one reason or another, food insecurity is said to exist. Again, if food is available but is not adequately utilized because of egoism or self-centredness, one cannot be sure of food security.

In the real world, there are other situations or circumstances, such as war, when there is an acute food shortage. The Boko Haram insurgency, for example, has created instability in the northern region of Cameroon and the north-eastern region of Nigeria. Food shortages may also be due to environmental and climatic changes, flooding and other factors which affect food production. This article argues that when there is nothing for people to eat because they cannot farm or harvest the crops planted, when there is a seizure of crops or they cannot get food supplies from relief agencies or even trade in and for food items from other areas, then there is food insecurity. This is worse than a situation when there is food which is not adequate for people to eat or when there is no stability in food supply. The escalation of war in northern Cameroon and Nigeria has prevented many from farming in the due season, harvesting what was planted and attending the market to buy or sell commodities. The situation is getting worse by the day as machine guns hit the earth clearing vegetation in their path and people scamper in different directions. In the midst of this chaos the Boko Haram insurgents have seized cattle and harvested or destroyed crops in anger and frustration. Refugees in the camps are insecure and cannot cultivate crops in the due season. Relief agencies have grappled with food scarcity as the number of refugees in the camps swell. Such a chaotic situation has compounded the food crises, which are already a serious problem in many African countries.

### **The Food Crisis in Northern Nigeria and Cameroon**

The Sahelian climatic conditions of northern Nigeria and Cameroon have had a negative impact on food production for a long time and explain why, from the colonial period, the British and French invested in agriculture

in northern Nigeria and northern Cameroon respectively. This already precarious situation has been compounded by the Boko Haram insurgency, which has engulfed this region since 2009. People have fled from one settled area to another for security and the tactics employed by Boko Haram have not been environmentally friendly. This has seriously affected food and cash crop production in this region.

Many of the internally displaced people in the north-eastern part of Nigeria face enormous difficulties in meeting their food and non-food needs. Assessments in late 2014 alone, following interviews with key informants in Gombe, Yobe and Adamawa states, revealed that vast areas of southern Yobe and Borno and northern Adamawa were under-cultivated and/or not harvested during the May to December main farming season as a result of attacks and conflict-related fears orchestrated by the Boko Haram insurgency in the area. Many of the internally displaced persons in north-eastern Nigeria can only secure a single meal a day. They have abandoned their farms, agricultural activities and homes due to insecurity. Internally displaced families have exhausted their food stocks and have turned to consuming grain reserved as seedlings for the next planting season. Off-season farming and fishing activities in the first half of 2015 were lower than before, thereby affecting agriculture and fish farming activities. As a result, many households in the affected areas in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa were left with significantly below-average food stocks in 2015. Income from agricultural wage labour for both the main and off-season periods were down due to decreased labour participation. As insurgents attacked livestock holdings and disrupted markets, incomes from livestock sales were also down.<sup>1</sup> Statistics for 2015 show that due to the Boko Haram insurgency more than 5.2 million people in north-eastern Nigeria suffered from severe food insecurity and some 54,000 faced famine. The current food insecurity crisis is massive in this conflict prone region of Nigeria. Over 15 million people are now food insecure of whom over 5.2 million are severely food insecure (Nigeria – Complex Emergency 2015:2; Imaseun 2015:289). This is a problem that is likely to last for a long time considering the level of destruction to the flora and fauna of this area.

The crisis in the North has also affected the supply of food items such as vegetables, beans, yams, groundnuts, potatoes, carrots, onions and beef to the southern states of Nigeria (Onwusiribe *et al.* 2015:218). Although these southern states are also engaged in the production of food, there is not always enough to meet their food needs. They have over the years relied on imports and additional supplies from the north to augment supply and their daily food intake. The insurgency has drastically reduced food production

in the northern states with the multiplier effect being a reduction in the number of trucks conveying food from the north to the southern markets and beyond. As a result, there has been food insecurity not only in the northern states of Nigeria but also in the southern states and other parts of Africa, such as parts of Chad that have traditionally relied on food from northern Nigeria for survival. Food insecurity is therefore not limited to the north-eastern region of Nigeria.

Since the outbreak of the Boko Haram conflict, Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, has been threatened by food insecurity (Awodola and Oboshi 2015:11). The city was a shipping port and leading commercial centre of the border region of Nigeria with Cameroon, Chad and Niger. It was also a hub for agricultural products from the twenty-seven local government areas of Borno State. These agricultural products were traded within the three main markets of the Baga fish market, Gomburu and Monday markets. The Gomburu market was additionally strategic and very important because of its location between the major roads leading from the Gomburu/Ngala border town to Cameroon and Chad (Awodola and Oboshi 2015: 13). Food crops were thus easily transported across the border to serve the pressing needs of the population in this region. The Monday market, for its part, served as a useful link for the distribution and supply of food within and outside of Nigeria. The agricultural sector, which feeds most of the people, has been the most affected sector of the economy of Maiduguri, the chief town of Borno State (Awodola and Oboshi 2015:13). Besides this, the entire north-east is a food producing region and also a passing point for livestock moving to different places. The Boko Haram insurgency has reduced household capacity to continue typical livelihoods and also decreased market function and trade flows (ACAPS 2014:2). This clearly indicates that as the war against Boko Haram goes on, the real cost can be found in the food sector, which has been stretched to the limit. It is likely to take a very long time for this trend to be reversed in the city of Maiduguri and other surrounding markets. The decrease in food production has also seriously affected agriculture-related business in this region of Cameroon and Nigeria.

The escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency has caused many farmers to abandon their farms for fear of attacks by marauding Boko Haram insurgents. A lecturer of agricultural science at the University of Maiduguri, Abba Gambo, said in 2015 that 'No one can move a kilometre due to fear. Most of them [local population] have fled their homes' (Muhammad 2015). The worst-hit states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa have often produced staple foods such as cowpeas, rice, millet, sorghum, corn, yams, tomatoes,

onions, fish and livestock. The farmers are no longer able to produce in sufficient quantities to meet the demand from other parts of Nigeria. Abba Gambo was in fact alluding to farmers who instead of going to the farms to cultivate crops were pre-occupied with their safety. Many of the youths who used to support agriculture in the rural areas have moved to Maiduguri. This has reduced the labour needed in the agricultural sector of this region of Nigeria. Others, for their own security, have escaped to neighbouring countries (Awodola and Oboshi 2015:13) as refugees. This became an endemic problem in 2016, considering that Maiduguri, which was more or less a crossroad for agricultural products from other areas of this region of Africa including Niger, Chad and Cameroon, no longer has this role. Maiduguri was for a long time an important link between the agricultural-producing regions of the south and the drier Sahelian region stretching up into Libya. Its decline has had a heavy toll on food shortages and the consequences thereof.

Vast areas of southern Yobe, Borno and northern Adamawa states have been under-cultivated or not harvested at all. This was the case, for example, between the months of May to December 2014; off-season farming and fishing was also affected. This situation has been compounded by the recurrent inter-communal conflicts in Bauchi, Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba States. These conflicts have disrupted agricultural activities and some markets from functioning across northern Nigeria (ACAPS 2014:3). The under-cultivation of crops or the inability to harvest what has already been planted is only exacerbating the food crisis in the northern parts of Cameroon and Nigeria. Off-season farming that used to supplement farm products in this region and the southern parts of the two countries has also been disrupted. This is against a backdrop of many more mouths to feed, and no food, which has led to famine and requests for food aid from international relief agencies.

The attack on markets as the latest strategy of the insurgents has scared many people who supplied or bought food items in the markets across northern Nigeria and Cameroon. Many of them who were involved in trading perishable commodities such as vegetables in markets like Gomburu have paid a heavy price, since they find it extremely difficult to deliver these vegetables. There has also been the additional difficulty of transporting food items from the local government areas of Borno into Maiduguri for fear of attacks by Boko Haram. This has further been complicated by the number of check-points mounted to control the movement and activities of the insurgents. The increase in transport fares caused by fuel scarcity has made matters worse. This is because very few vehicles circulate. The result



is limited food supply and an increase in prices of basic foodstuff which are beyond the reach of ordinary citizens, not only in the northern part of Nigeria but also in the southern region which relies heavily on the north for certain food items (Awodola and Oboshi 2015:14; Onwusiribe et al. 2015: 218).

In addition, many farmers who have braved the odds to cultivate crops in high demand in the cities and towns face difficulties in supplying these crops. This is because key bridges on important link-routes have been sabotaged by militants. Vehicles travelling on remote roads have been ambushed, crops destroyed and the occupants killed. A bridge linking Nigeria and border communities near Cameroon and another connecting Maiduguri in Borno State to Damaturu in Yobe State were both blown up by Boko Haram in 2014. This disrupted transportation in the region with long-term consequences on food supply across Cameroon and Nigeria. One fish seller in Maiduguri, Mohammed Sani, explained the disruptive effects of Boko Haram insurgents on the transportation of food from northern Nigeria to markets in different parts of the country in 2014 in the following words: 'Before this Boko Haram insurgency, we use to load 40 trucks with fish to the south every week on market days but now it has reduced to five trucks and a maximum of seven trucks a week' (Muhammad 2015). Many households in the southern states of Nigeria have been forced to exclude fish from their diet because of scarcity and the unusually high price of fish caused by higher demand than supply. The Brookings Institution in Washington reported that the production of corn, cowpeas, rice, sorghum and millet in the northeast region of Nigeria fell by an average of 76 per cent in 2015 when compared to the four years prior to 2009 (Muhammad 2015).

Many people who commuted from the North to as far south as Lagos, Ibadan and Ogbomoso to supply different food items like pepper, tomatoes and fish have abandoned this line of business (Awodola and Oboshi 2015: 14) because of the devastating effects of Boko Haram. This has personally affected them because they no longer have money from selling these items which can be used to buy other food items. The result has been insecurity of food sources in three agricultural producing states of north-eastern Nigeria namely Adamawa, Borno and Yobe. The food crisis rocking north-eastern Nigeria and extending to the southern part of the country has also gained currency in northern Cameroon, southern parts of Chad and the Niger Republic.

The debilitating effect of the Boko Haram insurgency on food insecurity in northern Cameroon manifests itself in the mass mobilization of young people to fight either for or against it. The consequence has been the

abandonment of agriculture (Akepe and Johnson-Rokosu 2016:34). The sustained Boko Haram incursions into the Far North Region of Cameroon from north-eastern Nigeria led to three consecutive years of poor harvests and disrupted markets and trade within and outside the region. This has led to a serious deterioration in the food security situation of the population of the Far North Region of Cameroon. According to a recent assessment by the Emergency Food Security unit of the World Food Programme (WFP) in the four most fragile regions of Cameroon almost 250,000 people are severely food-insecure and 1.7 million are moderately food-insecure. In June 2015 alone, over 200,000 people in the Far North Region of Cameroon lived with acute food insecurity and about 35 per cent of the children in the border areas were estimated to be malnourished. This has been compounded by the cross-border raids of Boko Haram since 2014 which have resulted in over 70 per cent of farmers of the Far North deserting their farms. The most affected divisions are Mayo Sawa, Mayo-Tsanaga and Logone and Chari. Women and children, who represent over 84 per cent of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in this region, are more at risk of food insecurity, especially because many have lost their husbands due to war and are now heads of households (ACAPS 2015:1). If the war persists, it seems likely the situation will deteriorate further.

The Boko Haram war has crippled the business of large-scale vegetable farmers in the Far North Region of Cameroon and eroded the livelihood of thousands of others who have relied on it for sustenance. The volume of farm produce has dropped and farmers are left stranded with decaying harvests of perishable crops. Mokolo, which overlooks Ndjaména, the capital of the Republic of Chad, used to be a trading hub for farm products, especially vegetables, drawing people from different countries including Chad, Mali and Sudan. Today, the town is virtually cut off from the rest of the country and is deserted with very little or no business taking place. The insurgency has had a crushing effect on agriculture and is likely to affect over two million people in the near future. Migration away from the epicentre of war has created chaos, disrupted regular farming and strained impoverished communities in northern Cameroon. This is compounded by the very unfriendly climatic conditions of this region of the country (Nforngwa 2016) which affect agricultural productivity.

The effect of the war on Boko Haram on food availability is very glaring among the refugees, many of whom are located within the North Region of Cameroon. The quantity of food given to them is small and has led to complaints from the refugees themselves. A Nigerian primary school teacher and resident of the Minawao refugee camp in the Far North Region

of Cameroon, Mr John Guige, lamented to the Inter Press Service (IPS) about the shortage of food for refugees in the camp. He opined that ‘They have reduced the quantity of food they used to give us and we still do not know why. But we are managing. We are refugees and we have no choice. All they give us is rice and some soya beans’ (Mbom 2016). Also expressing his frustrations about the shortage of food in the Minawao camp, Nigerian John Bouba, who escaped from the Boko Haram insurgency to the camp, said:

We sell half of it [rice] in the local market. We use the money to buy corn which we mix with some of the rice and grind it. After the third week, we eat rice till the next monthly rations of food are shared. We don’t know why but we are grateful to the people providing the food we eat. We cannot compare it to what we used to eat while at home in Nigeria. We worked and earned it. Here we are obliged to sit and wait on people of goodwill to support us (Mbom 2016).

It is clear from John Bouba’s lamentation of the precarious food situation in Minawao camp that there is not enough to feed the refugees in the Minawao camp. Refugees are more or less compelled to eat rice day in day out. Some of them have resorted to selling some of the rice given to them to buy corn which they mix with rice for consumption. The increasing food insecurity in this region of Cameroon has forced refugees to eat whatever is given them, even if they do not like it. This is contrary to what was available before the Boko Haram insurgency in this part of the country. The food-insecure situation deteriorated in 2015 with an increased wave of violence. According to Felix B.F. Gomez, country director of the United Nations WFP for Cameroon:

The number of people facing food insecurity has more than doubled since June 2015; some 1.4 million individuals are now estimated to be food insecure which represents over one-third of the region’s population. Some 200,000 people are facing severe food insecurity, which is an increase by 300 per cent since June 2015 (Mbom 2016).

The precarious food situation for the inhabitants of the North Region of Cameroon has increased with the escalation of the war against the Boko Haram insurgents. The longer the war, the greater the impact on food insecurity, which itself is a source of conflict. Mr Gomez may be exaggerating the real situation on the ground but the fact remains that the acute food shortages in the North Region of Cameroon are due to the Boko Haram insurgency and other human and natural causes.

Cattle rustling and kidnapping by armed groups from across the border in the politically unstable CAR have also disrupted farming and agro-

business in Cameroon's Adamawa region, a major beef producer not only for Cameroon but also for CAR.<sup>2</sup> Beef has become scarce and expensive, which makes it difficult for poor people to procure it for their protein intake. This phenomenon of destabilizing cattle rustling has become so endemic that in 2015 Felix Gomez said that 'We have noticed a deteriorating food security situation in the Adamawa region in 2015. Ongoing criminal activities such as kidnappings, stealing of cattle and crops have exacerbated the situation and impacted the farmers as well as cattle headers in the region'.<sup>3</sup> Such challenges do not provide a congenial environment for extensive farming to take place, leading to food scarcity and insecurity.

There are great challenges to food insecurity in the North Region of Cameroon caused by the destabilizing war against Boko Haram and also by natural phenomena. The region is generally known for a high level of food insecurity. It is also experiencing growing pressures on food supply due to the massive movement of people across the Cameroon and Nigerian borders caused by the political-religious conflict in this region. The droughts of 2009 and 2011 and damaging floods of 2010 and 2012 had a devastating impact on crops, resulting in poor harvests and famine. Cereal stocks in the Far North Region of Cameroon have dramatically declined during the period of the Boko Haram insurgency. In terms of its impact, the Cameroon Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development estimated that there was a deficit of 100,000 tons of cereals in northern Cameroon. This has exposed nearly two million people to famine.

In 2006, a few years prior to the violent eruption of Boko Haram, RELUFA, the Cameroonian Joining Hands network of the Presbyterian Hunger Programme, started community grain banks in some villages in the Diamare and Mayo Tsanaga divisions of the Far North Region of Cameroon to address the food insecurity situation there. These grain banks offered families the opportunity to borrow grain during the lean period and reimburse the grain borrowed during the harvest period. The reimbursement was accompanied by a small interest payment which led to an increase in grain stocks in community grain banks. These were well managed. Since 2006, this laudable initiative has grown like a mustard seed and now covers over forty-two villages. In addition, twenty-seven durable grain storage structures have been erected. RELUFA estimates that more than 25,000 people benefit, either directly or indirectly, from its community grain banks in the Diamare and Mayo Tsanaga divisions (Bamenjo 2015).

In spite of the laudable initiative of RELUFA, there are still serious food-related problems in this region of Cameroon. The Boko Haram insurgency has made it difficult for cereals that were borrowed from the grain banks

to be reimbursed. Due to the people's inability to reimburse these cereals, the multiplier effect has been a deficit in the restocking of cereals. In 2014 alone, there was a deficit of 189 bags (18,900kg) of cereals. This deficit incurred was twenty-nine out of the forty-two community grain banks (Bamenjo 2015).

North Cameroon served an important reservoir for food that was exported to Nigeria but this is no longer the case because of the Boko Haram insurgency. Products like onions, millet, peanuts and corn among others had a ready market in Nigeria, as well as other regions of Cameroon. Economic operators are now at a loss because this is no longer possible. Food insecurity is becoming a serious problem and the most concerned are those of the North and Far North regions of Cameroon. Apart from the limited market opportunities to supply communities in Nigeria, the population of these two regions of Cameroon suffer from adverse natural conditions – droughts, floods and poor soil quality. The food crisis is compounded by the influx of refugees from Nigeria who need food to survive (Mogoum 2015:1). The successive food crisis, not only in northern Nigeria and Cameroon, but in the entire Sahel region of Africa has resulted in the erosion of the resilience of the poorest and most affected populations including even the communities that host refugees. The poor families which have been dragged into a spiral of poverty have just one meal a day. This shows that the acute shortage of food makes many families vulnerable to diseases. This phenomenon of food insecurity caused by the conflict in Northern Cameroon and Nigeria has also taken its toll on the Boko Haram insurgents fighting to establish an Islamic State in this region.

### **The Impact of the Food Crisis on Boko Haram Fighters**

The Boko Haram crisis has also revealed that the insurgents are suffering from a food crisis which is partly their making. Due to the devastation that Boko Haram has caused, its insurgents are increasingly raiding villages for food instead of hostages. Cameroon's Far North Governor Midjjiyawa Bakary pointed out in 2016 that the insurgents were stealing everything because they needed food to eat (Marshall 2016). Since the insurgents scared people away from the markets, they are also feeling the pinch of a food crisis and doing everything within their reach to get food to stay healthy and sustain the war against the governments of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. In early February 2016, it was estimated that Boko Haram had stolen over 4,000 cattle in Cameroon alone. Many Boko Haram fighters scavenge for food in the Sambisa Forest in the dry season or raid different communities for food. In one instance in northern Nigeria in 2016, seventy-six Boko

Haram fighters who looked emaciated and begged for food, surrendered to military officials (Marshall 2016; Masciarelli 2016). These insurgents had run out of food supplies and become vulnerable to capture. Since the Multinational Joint Task Force took the war to the Boko Haram militants in 2014, they are not only losing ground and fighting back gallantly, but the food crisis is a setback to their ability to hold out against the multinational and civilian forces.

On the whole, there has been increasing malnutrition in the affected regions of northern Cameroon and Nigeria. Eight of the Sahelian states of Nigeria have been seriously affected by the seven-year-long insurgency. Over 43 million people are vulnerable, and in 2014, there was an estimated 1,207,466 children under the age of five who were acutely malnourished. In addition, about 3.4 million pregnant women and children under five were moderately malnourished (Joint Humanitarian Action Plan 2014). This has forced the governments of Cameroon and Nigeria to become weary of the plight of the population. If this is not urgently addressed, it will lead to a greater human catastrophe. There is need to address this crisis urgently and build a culture of peace in the affected region.

### **Measures to Address Food Insecurity**

Immediate, well-targeted assistance is needed for conflict-affected households in the north-east region of Nigeria, the Far North Region of Cameroon and the IDPs in urban centres and neighbouring areas. This is because many members of these urban and rural households may join criminal gangs to survive and further complicate the insecurity of this region in both countries. Targeted assistance should be carefully considered so that it does not fall into the wrong hands such as people interested in amassing wealth for themselves and further impoverishing and infuriating an economically weak population. Without well-targeted humanitarian support, it was expected that up to three million people would face food consumption gaps in Nigeria by July 2015. The World Food Programme (WFP) country director for Cameroon stated that the situation might be even more precarious in the near future considering that many more people are increasingly moving into refugee camps and young people – crucial manpower – are being killed in the course of fighting.<sup>4</sup>

The Nigerian and Cameroonian governments urgently need to mobilize money and other resources to invest in the agricultural sector in the southern states and regions to off-set the food shortages due to conflict in the north-eastern region of Nigeria and the Far North Region of Cameroon. Some basic commodities like onions, meat, groundnuts, that came from the north

when there was no conflict, helped to stabilize prices and enabled poorer households to put food on the table without much stress. This is not the case today because the conflict has affected agricultural production in the north. There is therefore a need to rethink other strategies to improve food production to satisfy the national market. Additional investment in the agricultural sector in the southern states and regions will go a long way to fight against poverty, eventually augment the food needs of the population of Nigeria and Cameroon, and be able to supply these items to the northeast and Far North respectively when the crisis is over and people re-engage in reconstruction. This reconstruction is likely to take a long time to be able to stabilize north-east Nigeria and the Far North Region of Cameroon. This can be done through various forms of incentives to local farmers such as giving them free land for crop cultivation.

There have been inflationary threats which have further worsened the precarious food situation in northern Nigeria and Cameroon. For example, increases in the cost of food have been a problem to the poor masses who cannot afford three meals a day. Disruptions to food distribution because of the insurgency are among the largest inflationary risks faced by the economy of not only Nigeria and Cameroon but also other neighbouring countries like Chad, Niger and CAR. The situation is further compounded by the food-supply bottlenecks linked to the insurgency and insecurity in some major agricultural zones of Nigeria. Nigeria now imports huge quantities of food to make up the shortage caused by the Boko Haram war in the northern part of the country (Muhammad 2015). There is in fact an economic recession in Nigeria with Boko Haram contributing to it. This has generally affected the supply of food to needy urban areas. One of the urgent measures to be considered is for the leadership of Nigeria to reassert its authority in the areas now threatened by the Islamist insurgency. This will likely convince farmers to return to the fields and increase food production and secure food supplies (Muhammad 2015) for the population in Nigeria and Cameroon. A lot has already been done to push the insurgents out of large swathes of territory they once held in Nigeria but from time to time suicide bombers still infiltrate these safe areas and cause havoc. The governments of Nigeria and Cameroon need to provide additional security by giving greater assistance to local vigilante groups than they are doing now. This will create the environment for crop cultivation and the organization of markets to facilitate food distribution from the rural to urban areas.

Additionally, faith-based organizations (FBOs) need to be encouraged to work together to instil peaceful co-existence among adherents of different religious persuasions. Together with community based organizations (CBOs)

they can mobilize people to go to the farms by giving them farm seeds, so that needy communities can be stabilized. Such a measure is better than mobilizing the FBOs to make donations of food only to people in dire need when this cannot be sustained. Food donations are only a short term measure to cushion the destabilizing effect of war on food security. A conscious effort of encouraging FBOs and CBOs to work towards mobilizing labour for food production is the way to address the food crisis that is rocking the northern parts of Cameroon and Nigeria. Other resources could be mobilized from within and without to ensure that once the conflict ends, food production is catalysed.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined the impact of the Boko Haram insurgency in the north-east part of Nigeria and the Far North Region of Cameroon on food insecurity in these regions and beyond. Conflict is often synonymous with food shortages, which then trigger other forms of conflict within affected communities or countries. Conflict forces people to become refugees, destroys the environment, diverts farm labour to fighting war and destabilizes supply networks of food from farms to the market. Without conflicts, people will devote their time to productive activities such as tilling the soil, cultivating and harvesting for home use and for the market. The problem of food insecurity would not be a problem if conflicts were prevented or managed successfully. A post-conflict community needs to work hard with other partners to reverse the trend of acute food shortages caused by war.

The food crisis in northern Nigeria and Cameroon has been compounded by the conflict between Boko Haram insurgents and regular government and multinational forces. Although the insurgents are losing ground to the multinational joint task forces, the war is far from over. Even as the regular forces gain successes on the battlefield, food production is losing and the insurgents are fighting back. Many families have abandoned their farms and the crops on them have either been stolen, destroyed by war or abandoned to rot in the bush. This is because the insurgents slaughter whoever they meet as they fight to control this region. Others have escaped from the region to other parts of Cameroon and Nigeria. Trade in agricultural commodities has been seriously affected and supplies to other regions have been irregular. Motorbike riders have been prevented from circulating beyond a particular period of time which affects business. Markets cannot be held because of the threats of suicide bombers and scarce resources have been mobilized for the wounded or sick with little or nothing left to feed the population. Even relief efforts have had their own problems and cannot provide the magic solution to the acute food shortages in the conflict zone. Measures



that should be taken in the short and long term to address an even more serious problem than conflict have been discussed. If not well handled, food insecurity may be the next conflict to seriously grapple with in affected regions of Cameroon and Nigeria.

## Notes

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