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Exploring the Intricate Landscape of Food Security: Lessons from Selected Rural Communities

Overview

Despite their population and economic potential, South Africa and Nigeria face daunting challenges in achieving comprehensive food security, demanding innovative approaches to combat poverty, ensure food and nutrition security, and preserve the environment. The vulnerability of rural communities is accentuated by widespread poverty, unemployment, and insufficient institutional support when faced with shocks and physical stressors such as COVID-19 lockdown, climate change, and inflation, which significantly disrupt access to food supply and livelihoods.

This policy brief draws on the complex realities of food security in deprived communities of Matatiele, Alfred Nzo District Municipality in South Africa, and Shiroro local government of Niger State in Nigeria. The findings reveal the urgency of proposing strategies for improving the livelihoods of rural communities, particularly marginalised groups like landless individuals, female-led households, and low-income families who are most susceptible, and emphasising fairness, equity, and context-specific and evidence-based solutions.

What is the issue?

The impact of climate change manifested through droughts, floods, and pest outbreaks, poses a significant threat to food security, particularly in semi-arid regions like Southern Africa. Despite ongoing efforts, the agricultural sectors of many African countries, including Nigeria and South Africa, continue to contend with challenges related to food access and availability, exacerbated by climate change. Food insecurity disproportionately affects rural areas, where poverty rates surpass 50% in South Africa, contributing to challenges such as malnutrition in KwaZulu-Natal (Govender et al., 2017). The Municipality of Matatiele faces high unemployment and economic underdevelopment, compounded by climate change impacts and the COVID-19 pandemic, severely affecting livelihoods and access to essential services (Cronje, 2014). Also, the Shiroro local government in Niger State, Nigeria, struggles with poverty, kidnapping and banditry, further intensified by the pandemic, adversely impacting the rural community's agriculture-based livelihoods and access to food (Sadiq & Kolo, 2015).

Consequently, the Sustainable Development Goal's objective to reduce undernourishment faces escalating challenges due to the prevalent food security predicament. This policy brief covers the scrutiny of the food security status in these selected rural communities, shedding light on the intricate complexities of its impact on rural livelihoods.

Why is it important?

Thriving rural communities are built on sustainable livelihoods, recognising the interconnectedness of various aspects of human, financial, social, physical, and natural capital. Food insecurity in rural communities indicates their low livelihood status, which stems from different factors such as unemployment, diminishing purchasing power, social security, and others that might be context-specific. Therefore, the role of governments through targeted programs and policies is crucial in influencing food security and sustainable rural livelihoods.

What valuable insights are gleaned?

Widespread poverty, unemployment, reduced purchasing power, and disrupted access to reliable food supply are primary contributors to food insecurity, exacerbated by recent sharp increases in global food prices. Chronic drivers like scarcity, environmental strains, limited land rights, and restricted market access make rural communities susceptible to food insecurity, further intensified by short-term drivers like food prices, potentially affecting the quality of life. While South Africa and Nigeria have established a national food security policy and implemented various programs, significant challenges remain in ensuring consistent access to nutritious food.

Despite efforts to establish a national food security policy, the current absence of legislative mechanisms hampers the implementation of the constitutionally guaranteed right to food. While government initiatives like the child support grant, school feeding schemes, and community food gardens aim to improve conditions for food security, potential threats to commercial food production pose risks to the country's impoverished population, particularly those vulnerable-disadvantaged rural communities with limited income and job prospects. Additionally, the need to address the ongoing issue of land restitution and equitable communal land tenure rights remains a concern, as a significant portion of rural households in South Africa struggle to afford food.

Nigeria's ranking of 38th globally in food security paints a stark picture. Historically, industrialisation policies focused on revitalising have been criticised for insufficient funding, heavy dependence on agricultural imports, poor governance, and corruption, hindering practical project and program implementation. Recent initiatives like the root and tuber extension program, community-based agricultural schemes, and special programs for food security showcase the government's commitment to combat hunger and enhance food security. However, insufficient funds remain a significant hurdle, particularly for improving accessibility in rural areas. This underscores the importance of addressing components like accessibility, availability, utilisation, and stability to achieve food security.

Both countries share a common thread. Regardless of differing policy approaches and historical contexts, South Africa and Nigeria face similar challenges in achieving food security. Addressing funding constraints, improving rural accessibility, and mitigating threats to domestic production are crucial steps towards a future where individuals have access to nutritious food, promoting a healthy and active life.

What are the policy options?

♣ Need to invest in rural market infrastructure: Improved access to market, storage facilities, and transportation networks will facilitate efficient distribution of farm produce and reduce post-harvest losses. This highlights the need for fair and equitable access to land,

access to clean and renewable energy, and other useful resources. Also, there is a need to support the development of climate-resilient technologies to promote sustainable farming practices, provide early warnings, and counter possible threats to realising food security.

- ♣ Enhance supply chain resilience: This is critical to withstand shocks like natural disasters, price fluctuation, and community conflicts. Upgrading transportation networks and communication systems will ensure efficient and reliable distribution of food products. Moreover, a resilient supply chain will be achievable when partnerships between farmers, traders, processors, and consumers are promoted.
- ♣ **Support agricultural production and processing:** The prioritisation of the development of local agro-based enterprises by providing affordable agricultural raw materials, offering tax breaks, and fair-trade practices will attract private sector investment in agriculture. It could also be targeted subsidies, skill development, and access to loan facilities to enhance income-generating possibilities and purchasing power.
- ♣ **Provision of an enabling policy environment:** Policymakers can unlock the potential of Agri-SMEs, driving rural development, and food security by fostering an environment that is conducive to financial inclusion. This could facilitate alternative collateral acceptance and encourage youth farmers.
- ♣ In conclusion, tackling food security in South Africa and Nigeria necessitates a multi-pronged approach that addresses poverty, climate change, and policy shortcomings while prioritising evidence-based interventions. Implementing these policy options requires the practice of good governance, and concerted effort from policymakers, local communities and various stakeholders to create sustainable, resilient, and inclusive food security strategies in both countries and beyond.

Cite this policy brief

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