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Nigeria's Food System Failure

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Nigeria's food crisis in 2026 is no longer a question of agricultural potential or policy intent. It reflects a system that can no longer reliably convert land, labour and policy frameworks into food availability, affordability and access. Recent United Nations early-warning assessments indicate that approximately 133 million Nigerians are at risk of hunger, with about 35 million projected to face acute food insecurity during the lean season. The scale and persistence of this outlook point not to a temporary shock, but to a structural failure in how Nigeria's food system functions.

At the core of this crisis is a transmission breakdown. Policies exist

across production, finance, inputs and markets, yet the mechanisms that should connect farms to consumers—security, macroeconomic stability, credit transmission, logistics and coordination—are fractured. The result is not a shortage of ideas, but an institutional inability to translate policy design into real-economy outcomes.

Evidence of Systemic Breakdown and Binding Constraints

This transmission failure is visible across multiple pressure points. Food inflation has remained persistently high, sharply eroding household purchasing power. In 2025, food inflation exceeded 30 per cent year-

on-year, with staples such as rice and maize rising even faster, outpacing wage growth and overall inflation. What might once have been cyclical price movement has hardened into a structural driver of food insecurity, particularly for poor and rural households.

Production is increasingly constrained by insecurity. Key food-producing areas in the Middle Belt, including Benue and Niger States, and in the North-West, notably Kaduna and Katsina States, have experienced prolonged violence, banditry and communal conflict. Displacement data indicate that large numbers of farming households have been forced off their land, disrupting planting cycles and reducing cultivated area. In this context, food insecurity in Nigeria is no longer primarily an agricultural problem; it is a security problem expressed through agriculture.

Macroeconomic volatility compounds these pressures. Fertiliser prices have more than doubled over the past eighteen months, while diesel—critical for irrigation, processing and transport—remains well above regional averages. Exchange-rate instability amplifies these costs, exposing farmers to losses and discouraging production. Under such conditions, reduced output is not irrational behaviour; it is a rational response to risk.

Even where production is sustained, distribution failures undermine effective supply. Post-harvest losses for cereals and legumes are estimated at between 20 and 30 per cent, driven by inadequate storage, poor rural roads and weak market integration. Food does not move efficiently from surplus to deficit areas, reinforcing regional price disparities and limiting national availability in practice.

Institutional Accountability and the Path to Stabilisation

Responsibility for these outcomes is institutional rather than personal. The federal government bears primary responsibility for national security, macroeconomic coordination and the alignment of agricultural strategy. Economic management institutions have failed to insulate food production from inflationary and currency shocks. Agricultural and financial institutions have not delivered inclusive, catalytic credit at scale. State governments, for their part, remain responsible for land governance, rural infrastructure and local market systems. The crisis, therefore, reflects a deep coordination failure across tiers of government, not a lack of policy formulation.

Elements of Nigeria's policy architecture are, in fact, directionally sound. Investment plans, farmer registries, agricultural finance initiatives and climate-smart strategies all point to a credible diagnosis. Their limited



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impact stems from weak sequencing around security restoration, unrealistic assumptions of macroeconomic stability, uneven sub-national capacity and insufficient attention to logistics. In short, policy design is relatively strong; policy absorption is weak.

Reversing this trajectory requires a shift from advisory recommendations to decisive, time-bound action. The federal executive must treat food system stabilisation as both a macroeconomic and national security priority. This entails convening a high-level food system stabilisation mechanism anchored in the presidency, securing key food-producing corridors, deploying targeted input-cost stabilisation instruments, and binding state governments into time-bound food system compacts linked to infrastructure, storage and extension outcomes.

Crucially, existing programmes must be consolidated around measurable results—hectares cultivated, yields delivered, food transported and prices stabilised—rather than expanded in number. Without this shift, policy will continue to accumulate without delivering impact.

Conclusion

If these decisions are deferred, the costs are predictable and cumulative. Humanitarian assistance will increasingly substitute for domestic production. Fiscal pressures will intensify. Food price shocks will intersect with urban labour stress, heightening the risk of instability. Over time, farming households may exit agriculture altogether, eroding long-term productivity and undermining policy credibility.

The warning signs visible in 2026 are not external shocks; they are reflections of unresolved institutional failure. Nigeria retains the resources to change course, but the margin for delay is narrowing. The task now is not to refine the diagnosis but to act on it—decisively, coherently and without delay.

Key Insights

1. Nigeria's food insecurity reflects a deep systemic failure to convert land, labour and policy into reliable food availability and access.
2. Food and agricultural policies exist, but weak coordination between security, finance, logistics and markets prevents effective implementation.
3. Violence, banditry and displacement in key farming regions are directly reducing cultivated land and disrupting agricultural cycles.
4. Soaring input costs and currency instability are making farming increasingly risky and economically unsustainable for producers.
5. Poor storage, weak infrastructure and fragmented markets cause large post-harvest losses and prevent food from reaching deficit areas.



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Nigeria's Real Risk: Institutional Latency

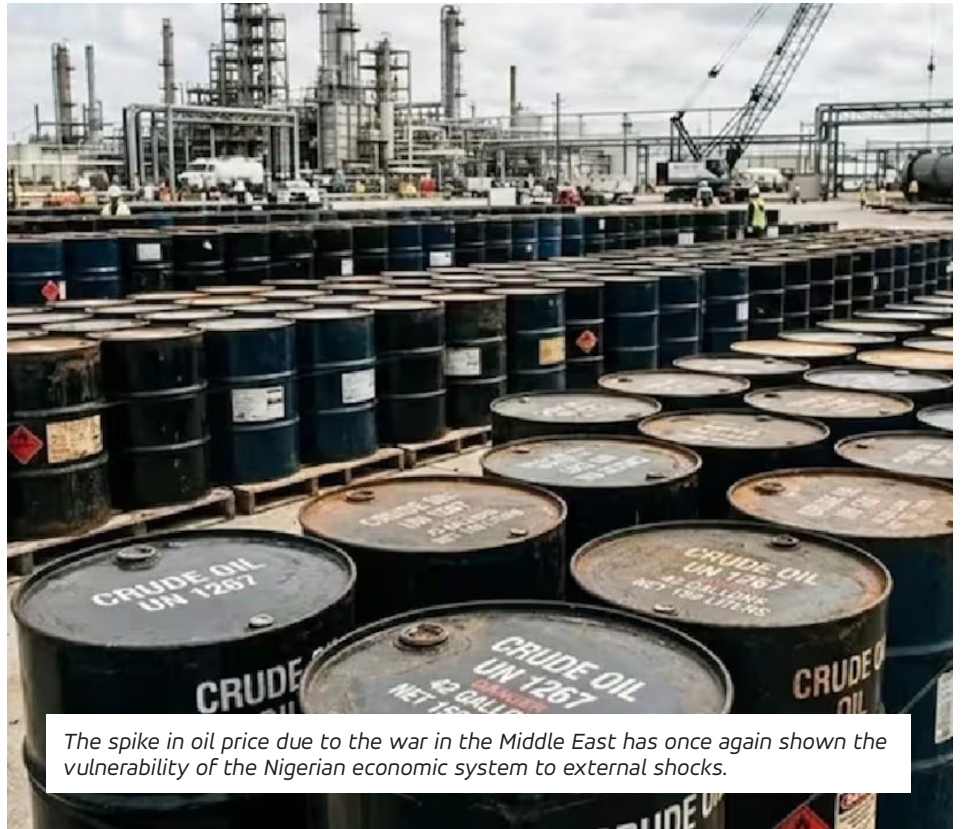
By Dr Adejoh Sunday

The escalation of hostilities involving the United States, Israel and Iran is not merely another episode of distant geopolitical turbulence. It is a reminder that the contemporary international system is increasingly defined by energy volatility, fragmented security commitments and accelerated information spillovers. For states with strong coordination and anticipatory capacity, such conflicts generate pressure that is disruptive but manageable. For those with weaker institutional synchronisation, the same conflicts transmit risk rapidly and unevenly across domestic systems.

For Nigeria, the danger does not lie in military entanglement abroad. It lies in policy unpreparedness at home. In an interconnected world, states are judged less by their physical distance from conflict than by their ability to anticipate and absorb second-order shocks. Nigeria's exposure—economic, security-related and social—remains significant not because of the conflict itself but because of institutional latency: the delay between recognising external risk and converting that recognition into coordinated domestic action. This latency has been evident before. It is evident again now.

Institutional Latency and the Missing Shock-Management Architecture

Nigeria does not lack awareness of international risk. External developments are routinely monitored by the intelligence community, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and economic management institutions. What is missing is a coordinated national framework that translates global developments into timely, cross-sectoral domestic responses across security, fiscal management, energy regulation and public



The spike in oil price due to the war in the Middle East has once again shown the vulnerability of the Nigerian economic system to external shocks.

communication. The failure is not conceptual; it is architectural.

There is no standing mechanism that asks, in real time, how an escalating external shock will affect Nigeria within 30, 60 or 90 days, and which institution should act first. As a result, global crises are processed sequentially rather than simultaneously. Institutions respond within their mandates, but not in concert. This structural delay allows external stress to diffuse through the system before coordinated mitigation begins.

The effects of this institutional latency are visible across several domains. In the security sphere, international conflicts with religious or ideological dimensions have repeatedly intersected with Nigeria's internal fault lines. In the early 2000s, reactions to Middle East conflicts

coincided with protest mobilisation in parts of northern Nigeria, particularly during the 2002–2003 period, when international events were reframed through local religious and political narratives. A similar pattern emerged during the 2014–2015 Gaza conflict, when solidarity protests and heightened sectarian rhetoric required reactive public-order responses in multiple urban centres. These episodes did not occur because Nigeria lacked intelligence. Rather, they revealed a persistent gap between early warning and preventive deployment.

Nigeria's intelligence agencies, including the Department of State Services and the Defence Intelligence Agency, produce regular threat assessments. Yet the National Security Council lacks a standing scenario-analysis function that systematically links external

geopolitical developments to domestic protest risk, ideological mobilisation or opportunistic exploitation by violent non-state actors. As a result, adjustments in security posture tend to follow visible escalation rather than precede it. The system activates late—not because it is blind, but because it is procedurally fragmented.

This vulnerability is compounded by Nigeria's dependence on international cooperation for counter-insurgency and stabilisation operations. Since at least 2015, efforts against Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province have relied on varying degrees of training partnerships, intelligence sharing, equipment support and diplomatic coordination with Western and regional partners. Such reliance is not inherently destabilising. The risk emerges when global attention shifts abruptly. During major external crises, such as the onset of the Ukraine war in 2022, international security focus, logistics and diplomatic bandwidth were demonstrably reallocated. Nigeria experienced delays in equipment delivery, training schedules and intelligence prioritisation during these periods.

What is missing is not recognition of this risk, but pre-planned domestic substitution. Nigeria lacks a consolidated framework for replacing temporarily reduced external support through budgetary insulation, accelerated domestic logistics and maintenance capacity, or pre-authorized reallocation within defence procurement lines. There is no routine stress-testing of Nigeria's security posture against scenarios of global distraction, leaving strategic exposure unaddressed until support thins.

Economic channels provide an even clearer illustration of how external shocks translate into domestic stress. Despite being Africa's largest crude oil producer, Nigeria remains structurally vulnerable to global energy

shocks because of its long-standing dependence on imported refined petroleum products. This exposure has been repeatedly demonstrated. Following global supply disruptions and risk-premium increases after 2022, Nigeria experienced sharp rises in domestic fuel prices. Between 2022 and 2024, fuel price adjustments contributed directly to headline inflation exceeding 30 per cent, with transport and food costs rising most rapidly.

The consequences were immediate and widely felt: higher transport fares, rising food prices, intensifying household pressure and elevated protest risk in urban centres. Nationwide protests following fuel subsidy reforms in 2023 underscored how quickly energy price shocks translate into social strain and pressure on law enforcement. Here again, the failure was not analytical. Energy vulnerability is well documented in government strategy papers and budget statements. The failure lies in preparedness. Strategic reserves, targeted buffers and pre-authorized stabilisation instruments exist only in fragmented or ad hoc form, limiting the state's capacity to respond swiftly when global shocks materialise.

Nigeria's exposure extends beyond its borders. An estimated 17 million Nigerians live, work or study abroad, including large populations

in regions vulnerable to geopolitical escalation. Evacuations from Libya in 2011, Ukraine in 2022 and Sudan in 2023 demonstrated both the state's commitment to citizen protection and the strain imposed by reactive coordination. In each case, evacuation planning and communication protocols were assembled under pressure, with inter-agency coordination improvised rather than executed from pre-tested templates. Even where outcomes were ultimately successful, these episodes exposed reputational risk and logistical inefficiency. Crisis preparedness in diaspora and consular affairs remains procedural rather than scenario-driven, with simulations, trigger thresholds and integrated communication chains yet to be institutionalised.

Responsibility, Decision and the Cost of Delay

The problem this reveals is not individual neglect, but institutional misalignment. Responsibility is distributed across the federal coordination architecture. The National Security Council lacks a standing function that maps geopolitical risk onto domestic stability. Fiscal authorities lack pre-authorized buffers and inflation-response triggers linked to external shocks. Energy institutions continue to acknowledge vulnerability without operationalising mitigation instruments. Diaspora and consular



GLOBAL IMPACT OF US-ISRAEL-IRAN WAR



PRICE INFLATION

Higher oil prices feed directly into transport, manufacturing, fertiliser, and food costs, pushing inflation across both developed and developing economies.



ECONOMIC STRAIN ON IMPORTERS

Countries that rely heavily on imported fuel face weakened currencies, rising subsidies, and fiscal pressure.



WINDFALL GAINS FOR SOME PRODUCERS

Oil-exporting states may benefit from higher revenues, though instability can offset those gains.

authorities remain underprepared for scenario-based crisis response. Risk is recognised in principle but not translated into time-bound, cross-sectoral action.

As a result, external crises enter Nigeria through familiar pathways: pump prices and inflation amplify household stress; global narratives reshape local protest mobilisation; donor and partner attention shifts weaken security and development coordination; and consular systems are tested by citizen vulnerability abroad. In the absence of coordination, these pressures accumulate incrementally rather than erupt dramatically, steadily increasing the cost of governance.



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Conclusion

The conflict involving major global actors does not threaten Nigeria directly. What threatens Nigeria is institutional latency—the lag between recognising risk and acting on it. In an interconnected system, resilience is measured less by reaction than by preparation.

Nigeria does not require a long-horizon reform agenda as an immediate priority. It requires an executive-level shock-response mechanism. A short-horizon geopolitical shock-response framework, anchored in the National Security Council and jointly executed with economic, energy and foreign affairs institutions, would translate external risk into domestic action. Such a framework would integrate scenario planning, pre-authorised fiscal and fuel-price stabilisation tools, capability substitution for security operations, and rapid consular response protocols. Convened regularly and empowered to escalate during crises, it would deliver within 90 days what Nigeria currently lacks: shared scenarios, response matrices and trigger thresholds. This is not bureaucratic expansion. It is shock-absorption capacity.

The constraints to such coordination are institutional rather than financial. Fragmented mandates, weak synchronisation between intelligence and economic management, and poor enforcement of coordination timelines can be addressed through executive directives and existing instruments, without new legislation.

Failure to adjust policy architecture will not trigger immediate collapse, but it will steadily increase the cost of governing under stress. That cost is avoidable—but only if anticipation replaces improvisation.

Key Insights

1. Nigeria's vulnerability is driven less by external conflict itself than by institutional latency—the delay between identifying global risks and coordinating domestic responses.
2. The absence of a unified, real-time shock-management system means geopolitical crises are handled sequentially across institutions rather than through coordinated action.
3. Security responses are consistently reactive because Nigeria lacks a standing scenario-planning mechanism linking external geopolitical events to domestic instability risks.



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NB: *The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the position of Athena Centre on the issues canvassed.*

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