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Beyond Force: Poverty, Hunger and Nigeria's Security Failure

By Oladiran Blessed

Nigeria's security challenges are no longer confined to isolated theatres. Since 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East has caused tens of thousands of deaths and displaced millions. Over the past decade, organised banditry, rural criminal networks, and mass kidnappings have intensified across the North-West and North-Central, while communal and resource-based conflicts persist in agrarian communities.

In 2025, a large-scale attack in Benue State reportedly killed about 150 civilians, reinforcing the pattern of sustained rural violence. Attacks on farming communities, abductions in schools and along highways, and assaults on places of worship indicate that insecurity has become embedded in daily life rather than emerging as episodic disruption.

The federal government's response—including expanded police recruitment, redeployment of forest guards, and the declaration of a nationwide security emergency—signals institutional resolve. However, the continued spread of violence across regions and typologies suggests that operational responses are not translating into durable stabilisation.

What is Failing: Strategic and Institutional Misalignment

Nigeria's security challenge is not primarily one of capacity; it is a problem of strategic alignment. The security architecture continues to treat poverty and food insecurity as downstream development concerns rather than core drivers of instability.

Three structural failures stand out:

- **Strategic design failure**

The national security framework prioritises territorial control and threat suppression without embedding poverty reduction and food security as stabilisation objectives. As a result, military gains are rarely consolidated through economic recovery or livelihood restoration.

- **Institutional coordination failure**

Key institutions—the Ministry of Defence, the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, and subnational governments—operate in parallel rather than within a unified stabilisation framework. There is no standing mechanism that integrates economic resilience into security planning.

Fragmented mandates, siloed budgeting, and weak operational integration reinforce this gap. Security institutions focus on response and containment, while economic ministries operate separately, leaving resilience outside core security design.

- **Budgetary prioritisation failure**

While defence and security allocations have expanded, investment in agricultural resilience, food system stabilisation, and livelihood recovery in conflict-affected areas has not kept pace. This imbalance weakens the state's capacity to prevent relapse into violence.

Collectively, these failures entrench a model of crisis management rather than conflict prevention. Force may suppress violence temporarily, but poverty and hunger continually regenerate the conditions for instability. The problem

is therefore simultaneously strategic, institutional, and fiscal.

Poverty and Food Insecurity as Security Multipliers

According to the World Bank's 2024 Nigeria Development Update, approximately 129 million Nigerians—about 56 per cent of the population—live below the national poverty line. Inflation, currency volatility, climate shocks, and subsidy reforms have significantly reduced household purchasing power.

Poverty in this context is not incidental; it functions as a multiplier of insecurity. Armed groups and criminal networks draw recruitment advantage from unemployment and deprivation, particularly among young people. Insecurity, in turn, disrupts farming, trade, and labour markets, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability.

Food insecurity intensifies this dynamic. The Food and Agriculture Organization has projected that over 30 million Nigerians face acute food and nutrition insecurity during the 2025 lean season, with risks rising into 2026. Insecurity restricts access to farmland, disrupts planting cycles, and drives food inflation, reinforcing grievance and competition over scarce resources.

In such conditions, food price instability is not merely economic; it is an early indicator of political fragility.

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Institutional Responsibility: Where Accountability Lies

Responsibility for correction lies not in abstraction but within existing structures.

- The National Security Council (NSC) must redefine security to incorporate socio-economic stabilisation as a core pillar of national strategy.
- The Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) should coordinate a cross-ministerial stabilisation framework.
- The Federal Executive Council must align fiscal priorities with this integrated approach.
- State governments must be formally embedded within implementation structures to ensure local execution and accountability.

The issue is not institutional absence, but underutilisation of existing authority.

The Immediate Policy Choice

Nigeria's leadership now faces a defining choice: whether to continue relying primarily on force or to recalibrate national security strategy around structural drivers of instability.

The immediate requirement is the formal adoption of an integrated security–stabilisation framework led by ONSA, linking security operations with food system protection, livelihood recovery, and poverty reduction in conflict-affected zones. This approach should be embedded in the next National Security Strategy review and reflected in the federal budget cycle. Without such recalibration, interventions will remain fragmented, reactive, and cyclical.

Conclusion

Failure to realign Nigeria's security strategy carries escalating systemic risks. Persistent insecurity will continue to erode agricultural productivity, deepen poverty, strain public finances, and overextend security institutions. Over time, this risks normalising permanent internal security operations while weakening state legitimacy in already vulnerable regions.

Security strategies that suppress violence without reducing vulnerability do not fail abruptly; they fail cumulatively. Nigeria's current trajectory risks entrenching instability as a structural feature of governance rather than a temporary condition. Integrating socio-economic stabilisation into national security planning is, therefore, not an expansion of mandate but a correction of design. The cost of delay will be measured not only in lives lost but also in the steady erosion of the state's capacity to restore durable peace and economic stability.

Key Insights

1. Nigeria's security crisis has evolved into a nationwide, multi-theatre conflict driven by insurgency, banditry, and communal violence.
2. Military and policing responses have expanded, yet insecurity persists, indicating a gap between operational action and structural stabilisation.
3. Poverty and food insecurity now function as direct enablers of recruitment, displacement, and sustained rural violence.

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GMO Foods and Nigeria's Trust Deficit

By Benedict Izuchukwu Ugochukwu

Nigeria's debate over genetically modified (GMO) foods is not fundamentally a dispute over science. It is a governance question. The central issue is the state's capacity to regulate, communicate, and supervise GMO adoption in a manner that is institutionally credible, publicly trusted, and economically coherent. While Nigeria has approved selected GMO crops and established a biosafety framework, weaknesses in coordination, transparency, and market governance continue to constrain adoption and risk undermining confidence in the wider food system.

The core problem is an institutional interface gap between biosafety regulation, agricultural policy, and consumer protection. Nigeria has a statutory biosafety authority and has approved varieties such as insect-resistant cotton and cowpea. Yet regulatory approval has not translated into public confidence or coherent market integration. This gap is sustained by three structural weaknesses.

First, regulatory communication is limited. Biosafety decisions remain highly technical and largely internal, with insufficient public disclosure of risk assessments, monitoring outcomes, or post-approval conditions. This opacity sustains distrust even where scientific processes are formally observed.

Second, post-approval oversight remains weak. While pre-release risk assessment is established, there is limited evidence of consistent post-market surveillance, independent seed performance auditing, or enforcement of stewardship obligations. This weakens regulatory credibility and reduces the state's ability to detect or respond to unintended consequences.

Third, seed market governance is underdeveloped. There is no sufficiently robust framework to manage dependency risks associated with proprietary seed systems, particularly where farmers cannot freely save or reuse seeds. In the absence of transparent licensing rules and competitive safeguards, the balance of bargaining power may gradually shift away from producers.

These weaknesses are institutional rather than societal. The National Biosafety Management Agency (NBMA) is mandated to regulate the approval of GMOs and ensure compliance. While approval processes exist, public communication and post-approval monitoring are not yet sufficiently institutionalised.

The Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security bears responsibility for integrating biosafety decisions into broader agricultural systems, including extension services, seed governance, and food security planning. At present, coordination between biosafety regulation and agricultural extension remains limited, leaving farmers under-informed about both risks and obligations associated with GMO adoption.

Consumer protection institutions also remain peripheral. The absence of clear, consistently enforced labelling standards weakens consumer agency and undermines trust in food markets, regardless of scientific safety determinations.

This governance gap is becoming more consequential as Nigeria faces intensifying food system pressures. Climate variability, pest outbreaks, rising input costs, and population growth are increasing the demand for productivity-enhancing technologies. At the same time, food inflation has heightened political sensitivity around agricultural policy. Without institutional trust, GMO adoption risks becoming politically contested, economically distorted, or policy-

reversible, undermining long-term food security planning.

Empirical experience already reflects this tension. Insect-resistant cowpea has demonstrated yield stability and reduced pesticide use under controlled conditions. Yet uptake remains uneven, reflecting uncertainty among farmers and consumers rather than agronomic performance. International evidence similarly shows that GMO outcomes depend less on the technology itself than on regulatory transparency, farmer safeguards, and communication credibility.

Effective GMO governance rests on three essential pillars: transparent approval processes, enforceable post-market monitoring, and clear rules governing seed ownership and reuse. Nigeria currently performs most strongly on the first, but less effectively on the latter two.

The Required Policy Decision

A clear policy choice is now required within the next 12 months. The federal government—through the NBMA and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security—should adopt a GMO governance consolidation framework built on four pillars:

- **Mandatory Public Disclosure:** All GMO approvals should include publicly accessible summaries of risk assessments, monitoring plans, and review timelines in clear, non-technical language.
- **Post-Approval Monitoring System:** Establish structured post-market surveillance, including field inspections, farmer feedback mechanisms, and periodic performance reporting.
- **Seed Market Safeguards:** Introduce licensing conditions that promote local seed multiplication, pricing transparency, and protections against restrictive dependency arrangements.
- **Consumer Labelling Standards:** Implement clear and enforceable GMO labelling requirements to strengthen consumer choice and rebuild market trust.

These reforms do not require new legislation but demand administrative discipline and stronger inter-agency coordination.

Conclusion

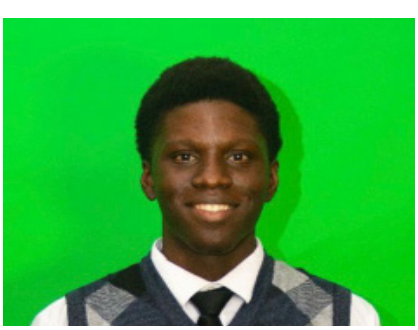
Failure to address these institutional weaknesses carries cumulative risks. Regulatory opacity will continue to erode public confidence and limit adoption. Weak post-approval oversight increases the likelihood of policy reversal if adverse outcomes emerge. Fragile seed governance risks concentrating power in ways that could destabilise agricultural markets over time.

GMO foods are neither inherently a solution nor a threat. Their outcomes will be determined by the strength of the institutions that govern them. Without deliberate reform, Nigeria risks repeating a familiar pattern in agricultural policy: technically sound interventions weakened by institutional fragility.

GMO foods are neither inherently a solution nor a threat. Their outcomes will be determined by the strength of the institutions that govern them.

Key Insights

1. Nigeria's GMO debate is fundamentally a governance and trust issue, not a scientific one.
2. Weak coordination between biosafety regulation, agriculture policy, and consumer protection has created a structural implementation gap.
3. Limited transparency, especially around risk communication and post-approval monitoring, continues to undermine public and farmer confidence.
4. Nigeria's seed system governance is fragile, raising concerns about farmer dependence, weak safeguards, and market power imbalance.
5. Without stronger institutional oversight, GMO adoption risks becoming politically contested and economically unstable despite technical potential.



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