Effect of Food Insecurity on the Employees Performance in Nigeria Public Service

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Abstract

This paper examines the effect of food insecurity on the performance of Nigerian public workers. Food insecurity had become a pervasive challenge in Nigeria, undermining not only household welfare but also national productivity and governance. Desk review methodology was used to establish the nexus between food insecurity and labour efficiency and governance outcomes. It was revealed that food insecurity contributes to increased absenteeism, low morale, declining productivity and weakened service delivery. It concluded that agricultural inefficiencies exacerbate food insecurity among workers. Policy recommendation such as wage reforms, food subsidy programs and nutrition support should be embarked on by the government amongst others.

Keywords: Food Insecurity, Employee Performance, Public Service

Introdution

Food is one of the most fundamental human needs, as recognized in global development frameworks and theoretical models of human motivation. Food

security as state in which all individuals have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and preference for an active and healthy life. Conversely, food insecurity refers to the lack of consistent access to adequate food due to economic constraints, supply disruptions, or systemic poverty. (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015).

Food insecurity is widely recognized as a major constraint to human development and economic progress. In Nigeria, the challenge has reached critical levels, with millions of citizens lacking reliable access to sufficient, safe and nutrition's food. While the issue has been extensively studied in relation to rural households, subsistence farmers, and vulnerable populations, less attention has been directed toward public workers, who are paradoxically among those experiencing food insecurity despite being in formal employment.

In Nigeria, food insecurity has become a critical national issue. According to the World Food Programme (2023). Over 25 million Nigerians are at risk of food insecurity, with 6 million in emergency situations. The causes are multifaceted, including rising food prices due to inflation, climate change – induced poor harvests, insecurity in agricultural communities, weak infrastructure, and policy failures, public workers, despite being salaried employees, are not insulated from these challenge. The erosion of real wages due to inflation ands stagnant salary structures has reduced their purchasing power, making it increasingly difficult to afford nutritious food.

Public workers are central to the functioning of the state. They design, implement, and monitor policies that shape the nation's governance and service delivery. When their health, motivation, and efficiency are compromised due to food insecurity, the ripple effect is felt across the economy and society. This nexus between food insecurity and worker performance is therefore of critical academic and policy interest. (Mungai and Mango, 2019).

Food insecurity has been linked to poor health outcomes, low labor productivity and reduced economic growth. However, in Nigeria, research has often focused on household food insecurity and agricultural production, with limited emphasis on its impact on the performance of public workers, despite their relatively stable

employment, Nigerian public workers face challenges of inadequate salaries, delayed payments and rising living costs. Many struggle to meet basic nutritional needs for themselves and their families.

Public workers such as teachers, health professionals, administrators and civil servants are central to the functioning of the Nigerian state. They implement policies, deliver essential service, and drive the machinery of governance. However, when food insecurity affects their households, the repercussions extend beyond individual welfare to the performance of the institutions they serve. This explores the intersection of food insecurity and public worker performance, arguing that the phenomenon is not merely a personal or household issue but a structural problem with implications for governance, productivity and national development (Adepoju & Oyewole, 2021).

Unfortunately, in the recent times, there has been an upsurge of violence, conflicts, terrorism and general insecurity which is mostly tied to terrorist attacks by Bokoharam sect (An Arabic term meaning Western Education is evil) and the Fulani Herders in Nigeria. The security threat have also manifested in the form of other negative spillover. Such as disorderliness, lawlessness etc. where small pockets of criminals have taken advantage of the bleeding situation in the country to perpetrate other forms of crime such as armed banditry, kidnapping, assassination and looting of properties. These has created the atmosphere of fear, suspense, and insecurity in the entire country.

The insecurity is having negative effects on farming and other agricultural activities in the country. Many farmers have been killed, kidnapped, raped and harassed by criminals and herdsmen. Many farmers quitted the agricultural industry to save their lives and avoid further loss of resources. Hence the crisis of food Insecurity in Nigeria. Based on this backdrop, the paper decided to examine the effect of the food insecurity on the performance of the public employee in Nigeria.

Statement of Problem

Nigeria, a country that is self-acclaimed the giant of Africa with the growing population of over 200 million has found herself in the web of food insecurity for

quite a long times, following on her inability to provide enough food to feed her teeming populace. Especially since the early 1970s. This was coupled with the abandonment of agriculture which was the ministry of the country before the discovery of crude petroleum. Nigeria food import bill has witness astronomical increase following the country's in ability to successfully implement its various agricultural policies and programmes.

Conceptual Clarifications

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity refers to a condition in which individuals or households lack consistent access to sufficient, safe and nutrition food require for a healthy and active life. According to the food and agriculture organization (FAO, 2014) food insecurity exists when people do not have physical, social and economic access to enough food that meets their dietary needs and preferences. In Nigeria, food insecurity is not merely the absence of food but a complex socio-economic and political issue that affects millions of people to reflect both the quantity and quality of food available, as well as people's ability to access and utilize it effectively (Adeforitr & Onikami, 2024).

Dimensions of Food Insecurity

(FAO, 2025) identifies four interrelated dimensions:

1. Food Availability

Food availability relates to the supply side of food production and distribution, including agricultural output, import and storage systems. In Nigeria, food availability is often undermined by low agricultural productivity due to factors such as poor irrigation inadequate use of technology and effect of climate change.

2. Food Accessibility

This focuses on the economic and physical ability of individuals to obtain food. Many Nigeria households struggle with this due to high poverty rates, unemployment, inflation and rising food prices. In some rural areas poor road networks and insecurity also limit physical access to markets.

3. Food Utilization

Food utilization refers to how the body uses the nutrients in the food consumed. This depends on the equality and adversity of the diet, as well as health and sanitation conditions. In Nigeria, malnutrition remains as major challenge, especially among children under five, due to inadequate dietary diversity and poor access to healthcare and clean water.

4. Food Stability

Food stability is the final dimension. It emphasized the consistency of food access and availability over time even when food is available and affordable, instability causes by conflicts, economic shocks or natural disasters can quickly lead to food insecurity. In Northern Nigeria, for inoance, conflicts and displacement have severely disrupted agricultural activities, leading to widespread hunger and reliance on humanitarian aid.

Causes of Food Insecurity in Nigeria

1. Insecurity and Armed conflict

Armed groups—including bandits, herdsmen militias, Islamic extremists (notably Boko Haram), and insurgents—attack farming communities, steal livestock, destroy crops, and force farmers to abandon their fields for fear of kidnappings, killings, and raids.

Because of these security threats, many farmers either reduce the amount of land they cultivate, delay planting or harvesting out of fear, or leave farming entirely. This results in lower production of staple foods such as maize, rice, yam, sorghum, and millet.

The human cost is compounded by displacement. Farmers forced to flee their homes lose access to their land, which not only reduces agricultural output locally but also increases food demand in host communities, As a result, more families—especially those with limited means—become food insecure in terms of how availability, access, utilization, and stability.

2. Weak policy and governance

Government policies can sometimes undermine food security: for example, the removal of fuel subsidies made transport much more expensive, increasing the costs of agricultural inputs and food distribution.

National Strategic Food Reserves have been less effective than they could be, due to poor management, inadequate storage infrastructure, and insufficient restocking. This limits their capacity to act as buffers against shortages and price spikes. (Zakari and Abdullahi, 2003)

3. Land access, farmer-herder conflict, and resource competition

Shrinking or degraded grazing land and water resources—driven by climate change and overuse—push nomadic herders southward in search of pasture, bringing them into conflict with settled farmers. These conflicts disrupt farming, displace both farmers and herders, reduce available land for cultivation, and often deter investment in agriculture. Finally, these disruptions raise food prices while incomes of farming and affected households drop. (Aibieyi and Oyemwinmina, 2022).

4. Climate change and environmental shocks

Unpredictable rainfall patterns, droughts, and floods increasingly undermine agricultural production in Nigeria. In many farming regions - especially in the north - rain-fed also Floods have submerged large tracts of farmland, cutting yields for staples like rice, maize, and sorghum. Also, desertification and soil degradation reduce arable land, worsening competition for fertile land.

5. Economic constraints, inflation, and high input costs

Rising costs of fuel, fertilizer, seeds, and transport squeeze farmers' budgets and reduce capacity to invest in inputs needed for high yields.

Inflation is very high - both food inflation and general inflation - making food prices soar while household incomes stagnate or fall, pushing many into poverty. (Yusuf and Omonona, 2002).

The Nexus between Food Insecurity and Employee Performance

There exists a strong and multidimensional relationship between food insecurity and employee performance, especially in the context of Nigeria's public service

sector. Food insecurity, defined as limited or uncertain access to sufficient and nutritious food, affects not only the physical well-being of employees but also their mental, emotional, and psychological states. When public servants are unable to meet their dietary needs, it directly undermines their ability to function effectively in their roles. This relationship is particularly important in Nigeria, where economic hardship, inflation, and rising food prices have pushed many working-class families—public servants included—into various levels of food insecurity.

At the most fundamental level, food provides the energy and nutrients necessary for the human body to function optimally. When employees are food insecure, they often experience fatigue, weakness, and lack of stamina, which hinders their ability to perform tasks that require sustained physical or mental effort. For public service employees, whose roles often involve administrative tasks, decision-making, field work, and service delivery, this reduction in physical and cognitive capacity translates into poor productivity and inefficiency. Employees may struggle to concentrate, make errors in judgment, and complete their assignments more slowly, all of which affect the overall output and quality of public service delivery.

Beyond the physical impacts, food insecurity also carries serious psychological consequences. The stress and anxiety associated with not knowing where the next meal will come from—or having to provide for dependents under constrained financial conditions—can lead to depression, low morale, and emotional exhaustion. These mental health challenges reduce employee motivation and commitment, fostering a disengaged workforce. Public servants who are preoccupied with personal survival are less likely to be innovative or committed to institutional goals.

The Effects of Food Insecurity on Wokers Productivity

1. Decline in Physical Health of the employees

Food insecurity directly affects the physical health of public service employees by limiting access to sufficient and nutritious food. Poor diets, low in protein and essential vitamins, can lead to fatigue, frequent illness, and low energy levels. As a result, productivity declines, and sick leave increases, putting pressure on already stretched departments and reducing the efficiency of public institutions.

2. Poor Decision-Making

Public servants who are food insecure may struggle with attention to detail, make frequent mistakes in documentation or reporting, and show a general decline in mental alertness. This can compromise the accuracy of data, delay policy implementation, and affect the quality of services provided to the public, particularly in sensitive sectors like health, education, or finance. A lack of proper nutrition—especially deficiencies in iron, glucose, and key vitamins - can impair cognitive function. Hunger reduces concentration, memory retention, and decision-making capacity.

3. Increased Stress, Anxiety, and Mental Health Challenges

Food insecurity is a major source of psychological stress. Worrying about where the next meal will come from or how to provide for one's family hunger contributes to anxiety, depression, and chronic stress among public employees. This emotional burden reduces motivation and morale, leading to disengagement from work responsibilities. Over time, the quality of employee-citizen interactions can deteriorate, as stressed workers are less likely to render services with care or patience, further eroding trust in public institutions. (Alabi and Dangana, 2025).

4. Poor attendance, lateness, and Absenteeism

The inability to provide and manage household food needs often leads employees to arrive late to work, take days off to source food, or engage in side jobs to supplement income. Rising transport and food costs also mean that some cannot afford daily commuting, especially in rural or under-resourced areas. This leads to irregular attendance and absenteeism which disrupts workflow, slows down administrative processes. (Ajetanmobi, 2024).

Decreased Productivity and Output

When employees are undernourished and mentally preoccupied with basic supply, are unable to operate at optimal productivity levels. Tasks take longer to complete, errors become more frequent, and the overall output quality drops. This decline can lead to backlogs, inefficiencies, and citizen dissatisfaction. (Adepoju, Esan and Akinyomi, 2022).

5. Reduced Motivation and Job Satisfaction

Persistent food insecurity creates a sense of hopelessness and dissatisfaction among public servants. If wages no longer cover basic needs—particularly food—it becomes difficult for employees to feel motivated. This leads to a "minimum effort" mentality where individuals do only the bare minimum required to retain their jobs.

6. Erosion of Ethical Standards and Oversight

Under financial stress, some public servants may resort to unethical behavior to meet their basic needs. Food insecurity and economic desperation can increase susceptibility to bribery, manipulation of procurement processes, or cutting corners to save time and effort. Mistakes due to inattention may also go unnoticed in poorly supervised environments, reducing the overall accountability and transparency of public institutions

7. Long – term health and workforce degradation

Prolonged food insecurity has cumulative effects on employee health and capacity. Chronic conditions such as malnutrition – related anemia, high blood pressure due to stress, or diabetes, poor dietary patterns can emerge, reducing the number of year's employees can serve effectively, cognitive and physical decline also limits their ability to acquire new skills or adapt to evolving job demands. This diminishes the long – term quality and competitiveness of Nigeria's public work force, and contributes to stagnation in institutional development.

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Food insecurity also forces many public servants to engage in coping strategies that further disrupt their work performance. For example, some may take on side jobs or informal trading to supplement their income, leading to divided attention, absenteeism, and lateness. Others may skip meals entirely, resulting in presenteeism—where they are physically present at work but unable to function effectively.

In conclusion, the nexus between food insecurity and employee performance is both profound and far – reaching. It affects the individual capacity to workers, the functioning of government institutions and the broader effectiveness of the public sector.

Theoretical Framework

This paper utilized Maslow's Hierarchy of need for analysis. Maslow's Hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943. It outlines a five-tier model of human needs arranged in a hierarchy from the most basic and essential to the most advanced and self- fulfilling. This theory suggests that human motivation is driven by the desire to meet specific needs, and lower – level needs must be met before individual can focus on higher – level needs (Maslow, 1943).

According to him, human needs are classified int five level of needs (hierarchy). They are:

1. Physiological Needs (Basic Needs)

There are biological require human survival: food, water, air, shelter, sleep and clothing. Without meeting these needs, the human body cannot function properly. Food insecurity falls under this category.

2. Safety Needs

This includes personal security, financial stability, job security, health and protection from harm.

After physiological needs are met, individuals seek security and safety in their environment

3. Love and Belongingness Needs

These involve emotional relationships: friendship, intimacy, family and social connections in the workplace, this includes teamwork, collaboration and workplace relationships.

4. Esteem Needs

Once the need to belong is fulfilled, individuals seek self – esteem, recognition and personal achievement.

In a work context this includes promotions, praise and responsibilities.

5. Self - Actualization Needs

This is the desire to become the most one can be- personal growth, creativity, innovation, and achieving one's full potential.

It represents the highest level of human motivation

Relevance of Maslow's Theory to the Write – up

Maslow's theory is highly relevant to understanding the effects of food insecurity on public service employee performance in Nigeria, as it explains why unmet basic needs (like food) create barriers to employee is the cannot reach their full potential (self – actualization) if the constantly battling hunger, stress and poverty food insecurity blocks the path to creative thinking, innovation and leadership- key qualities needed in public service for policy formulation, public engagement and national development.

Food insecurity does not affect all public servants equally. Lower-grade employees, women (particularly single mothers), and workers in rural or high-cost areas are often more vulnerable. This creates disparities in workplace morale and performance, as disadvantaged groups experience greater stress and lower

job satisfaction compared to their counterparts. Over time, such inequities can affect team cohesion and fairness in the public sector.

Conclusion

Food insecurity among Nigerian public service employees is a significant and growing challenge that undermines the effectiveness, efficiency and integrity of government operations. The inability of workers to access adequate and nutritious food impacts their physical health, mental well – being, cognitive functioning, motivation and overall job performance. As employees struggle to meet basic survival needs they become more prone to absenteeism, lateness, reduced productivity, and even ethical lapses. These individual – level challenges cascade into broader institutional weaknesses, affecting the quality of service delivery, policy implementations and public trust in governance.

Recommendations

To address the negative effects of food insecurity on employee performance, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

1. **Review and Adjust Public Sector Salaries**

The government should regularly review and adjust public service wages and allowances to reflect the rising cost of living, particularly food inflation.

2. **Introduce Food Support Programs**

Establish food support schemes for vulnerable public servants, such as subsidized meals, food vouchers, or periodic food packages.

3. **Support Vulnerable Groups within the Workforce**

The government should develop targeted support for female employees, junior staff, and rural workers, who are often more affected by food insecurity.

4. **Embed Welfare Provisions in Civil Service Reform**

The government should incorporate employee welfare and food security provisions into ongoing civil service reforms.

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