

The Tripartite of Food Security, Diplomacy and National Security in West Africa

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Abstract

Food insecurity remains a critical dimension of insecurity in West Africa, exacerbated by post-pandemic disruptions and the global effects of the Russia-Ukraine war. As one of the most climate-sensitive regions globally, the sub-region faces complex interactions between environmental stress, political instability, and economic vulnerability. This study examines the dynamics of food security-driven economic diplomacy in West Africa between 2015 and 2024, focusing on the roles of the Economic Community of West African States, the African Union, the European Union, China, and other multilateral institutions. Anchored in Regime Theory and adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study draws on data from 400 respondents across local communities, policymakers, and institutional actors, analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic techniques. The findings indicate that while regional initiatives such as food reserves and resilience programmes have improved short-term food availability and strengthened cooperative frameworks, their long-term impact remains limited by structural constraints, including weak governance, insecurity, and dependence on food imports. The study further reveals that food security diplomacy operates more effectively as a crisis management tool than as a mechanism for sustainable transformation. It concludes that although institutional cooperation in West Africa has expanded, significant gaps persist in translating diplomatic engagements into durable food security outcomes. The study underscores the need for stronger institutional coordination, context-specific interventions, and enhanced regional integration to achieve sustainable food security and stability.

Keywords: Food; Security; Stability; International Relations.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, food security has re-emerged as a central axis in global development and diplomacy, driven by an unsettling recurrence of natural and environmental events and convergence of crises. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of global food supply chains, which disproportionately impacted import-dependent regions (Laborde, Martin, and Vos 2020). This fragility was further compounded by the Russia-Ukraine war, which disrupted global grain and fertilizer exports, driving up food prices and intensifying hunger in vulnerable economies (FAO 2022; World Bank 2023). Concurrently, the worsening effects of climate change, ranging from erratic rainfall to desertification, have undermined agricultural productivity, especially in regions that were already facing structural poverty and weak governance systems (IPCC 2022). These compounded shocks have forced a rethinking of food security not only as a developmental issue, but also as a diplomatic and security imperative (Lambe 2025).

In Africa, and particularly across the West African sub-region, food insecurity has taken on acute dimensions. Despite abundant arable land and a large youthful population, the region remains heavily reliant on food imports, leaving it vulnerable to price volatility and supply disruptions (ECOWAS 2021). Moreover, chronic underinvestment in agriculture, outdated production systems, and deepening land-use conflicts, especially between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers, have escalated local grievances and triggered recurrent violence (Okoli and Atelhe 2020; Nwoko 2023). These crises have been described as not only developmental but also political, undermining state authority and fuelling instability across border regions.

In response, both regional and external actors have mobilized resources and diplomacy to address the worsening food crisis. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union have pursued agricultural transformation strategies, while bilateral and multilateral partners, including China, the European Union, and the World Bank, have increasingly tied aid and investment to food security agendas (NEPAD 2021; EU External Action 2023). However, despite all these, the effectiveness of these interventions remains contested, raising critical questions about ownership, alignment with local realities, and the geopolitical interests driving food-related economic diplomacy.

Food insecurity has become one of the most destabilizing forces in the contemporary global order, threatening not just livelihoods but also national cohesion, regional peace, and the credibility of development diplomacy. As of 2023, an estimated 735 million people face chronic hunger globally, an increase of over 122 million since 2019, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and climate-related shocks (FAO 2023). Nowhere is this convergence of crises more visible than in West Africa, where over 44.5 million people are projected to face acute food insecurity during the 2024 lean season alone, a nearly 70% increase from 2021 figures (WFP&FAO 2024; Cadre Harmonisé 2024).

Despite its agro-ecological potential, West Africa remains heavily import-dependent for strategic food staples ([Ibrahim and Lambe 2024](#)), with countries like Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana importing over 40–60% of their wheat and rice needs ([ECOWAS 2022](#)). This dependence exposes the region to global price shocks and external policy shifts, with food inflation reaching 28.4% in Nigeria and over 18% in Ghana by late 2023 ([AfDB 2023](#)). Concurrently, localized crises such as the farmer-herder conflicts, land degradation, and climate variability have disrupted domestic production and displaced millions, particularly in the Sahel belt ([IPCC 2022](#); [Okoli and Atelhe 2020](#)).

While several national and regional responses have emerged, including ECOWAS's Food Security Reserve and bilateral agreements with the EU, China, and Gulf states, insufficient empirical assessment can be noticed regarding the way these diplomatic and economic interventions have impacted actual food security outcomes in the region. Equally, it has been noted that aid conditionalities, infrastructure gaps, and poor policy coordination often dilute the effectiveness of these initiatives, while geopolitical interests continue to shape their design and implementation ([NEPAD 2021](#); [EU External Action 2023](#)).

In effect, West Africa is not just facing a humanitarian food crisis, but a complex developmental and geopolitical dilemma where food security has become both a tool and a terrain of economic diplomacy. So, the research gap that the study seeks to cover refers to how and to what extent these food diplomacy efforts have been able to translate into tangible improvements in food access, affordability, and resilience, especially for the most vulnerable population. Upon this, the study assesses the impact of food security-driven economic diplomacy in West Africa between 2015 and 2024, a period marked by compounding global shocks and intensified regional insecurity.

1. Literature Review

The nexus between food security, diplomacy, and national security in West Africa has attracted increasing scholarly attention, particularly in the context of rising food crises, climate variability, and regional instability. Existing literature converges around three dominant strands: institutional interventions and regional governance, structural drivers of food insecurity, and the security implications of food system vulnerabilities.

First, a significant body of work focuses on regional and international institutional interventions aimed at addressing food insecurity through coordinated policy frameworks and economic diplomacy. Regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union have implemented initiatives, including the Regional Food Security Reserve and the West Africa Food System Resilience Programme, often in partnership with external multilateral actors such as the European Union, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund. These interventions are designed to stabilise food supply, promote agricultural productivity,

and enhance resilience. However, empirical evidence suggests that the effectiveness of these institutional frameworks remains contested. For instance, Nwozor and Olanrewaju (2020) argue that alignment with regional frameworks such as ECOWAP (the ECOWAS Regional Agricultural Policy) and CAADP (Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme) has not translated into meaningful food security gains in Nigeria, largely due to governance inefficiencies and weak policy implementation. Similarly, a European Commission (2022) report finds that increased public spending on agriculture in ECOWAS states has not significantly reduced undernourishment, highlighting a persistent gap between policy intent and outcomes.

Second, the literature identifies deep structural drivers of food insecurity that limit the success of diplomatic and institutional efforts. These include historical, political, and economic constraints. Isah (2023) attributes food insecurity in the region to colonial legacies, governance failures, and the commodification of food systems, while Muhammad and Babatunde (2023) emphasise trade barriers, weak regional integration, and infrastructural deficits. Notably, intra-regional food trade remains largely informal, reducing the effectiveness of formal trade policies.

Environmental and conflict-related factors further complicate this landscape. Gold (2024) demonstrates a long-run positive relationship between climate change indicators and food insecurity, underscoring the vulnerability of agricultural systems to environmental shocks. Likewise, Ujunwa, Okoyeuzu, and Kalu (2019) find that armed conflict significantly undermines food security across ECOWAS states, reinforcing the link between instability and food system disruption.

Third, a growing strand of literature situates food security within a broader national and human security framework. Empirical studies show that institutional quality, economic growth, and social protection mechanisms play critical roles in mitigating food insecurity. Osabohien et al. (2022), using a generalized method of moments approach across 15 ECOWAS countries, find that social protection programmes have a statistically significant positive effect on food security, suggesting that redistributive policies can buffer vulnerable populations against shocks. Complementary evidence from recent cross-country analyses indicates that strong institutions enhance food security outcomes, while dependence on natural resource rents and exposure to climate change exacerbate vulnerabilities.

Despite these insights, a critical gap persists in the literature. While existing studies examine food security from economic, environmental, or institutional perspectives, there is limited integration of food security with diplomatic strategy and national security considerations within a unified analytical framework. Most studies treat these dimensions in isolation, thereby underestimating the way how food insecurity can both shape and be shaped by regional diplomacy and security dynamics (Lambe 2025). This study addresses this gap by conceptualising food security not merely as a development issue, but as a strategic nexus linking economic diplomacy and national

security in West Africa. By doing so, it moves beyond fragmented analyses and offers a more integrated understanding of how regional cooperation, external partnerships, and internal governance structures interact to influence food security outcomes.

2. Theoretical Framework: Regime Theory

This study is anchored in Regime Theory as articulated by Robert O. Keohane, particularly in his seminal work *After Hegemony* (1984). Regime Theory provides a framework for understanding how cooperation is sustained in an anarchic international system through institutionalised arrangements among states and non-state actors.

At its core, Regime Theory conceptualises international regimes as sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue-area (Keohane 1984). These regimes reduce uncertainty, mitigate transaction costs, and address collective action problems, thereby enabling cooperation even in the absence of a central authority. Crucially, the theory departs from purely realist assumptions by demonstrating that cooperation is possible among actors with asymmetric power and divergent interests, provided institutional frameworks structure their interactions.

In the context of West Africa, food security governance increasingly reflects the characteristics of an emerging regional and transnational regime. Institutions such as the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union, alongside global actors like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the European Union, collectively contribute to a structured system of norms and practices governing food security interventions. Programmes such as the Food System Resilience Programme and regional food reserves are not isolated initiatives; rather, they represent institutionalised responses embedded within a broader cooperative framework.

Regime Theory is particularly relevant in explaining how economic diplomacy operates within this institutional architecture. Financial assistance, technical cooperation, and policy harmonisation initiatives reflect negotiated outcomes within a regime where actors pursue both national interests and shared goals. For instance, external actors such as China engage in bilateral agricultural cooperation, while multilateral institutions provide funding conditionalities and policy guidance. Despite disparities in economic and political power, these interactions are sustained through agreed norms and mutual expectations, illustrating the regime logic of cooperation under asymmetry.

More importantly, the theory provides analytical leverage for understanding the link between food security and national security. Within a regime framework, persistent food insecurity signals not merely policy failure but institutional weakness within the regime itself. When rules are weakly enforced, coordination fails, or compliance is low, the result is systemic vulnerability, which can escalate into social unrest, conflict, and broader security threats. Thus, food insecurity becomes both an

outcome of regime inefficiency and a trigger for instability, reinforcing the need for effective institutional coordination.

However, Regime Theory also implies that the mere existence of institutions does not guarantee effectiveness. The performance of a regime depends on compliance, enforcement mechanisms, and the alignment of member state interests. In West Africa, variations in governance quality, political commitment, and resource capacity undermine the effectiveness of existing food security regimes. This explains why, despite the proliferation of initiatives and external support, food insecurity persists across the region.

Accordingly, this study employs Regime Theory not simply as a descriptive framework, but as an analytical tool to interrogate the effectiveness of institutional cooperation in addressing food security and its implications for national security in West Africa. It enables an integrated assessment of how regional and international actors interact, the extent to which institutional arrangements shape outcomes, and why gaps persist between policy design and real-world impact.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of the nexus between food security, diplomacy, and national security in West Africa. The use of mixed methods is justified by the need to combine statistical generalisation with contextual depth, a strategy widely endorsed in social science research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018).

The study focuses on selected countries within the West African sub-region under the institutional framework of the Economic Community of West African States. The geographical scope reflects areas significantly affected by food insecurity and actively engaged in regional and international food security interventions. The temporal scope covers the period 2015 to 2024, aligning with major policy interventions and food security programmes implemented by regional and global actors.

The target population comprises two principal categories:

- **Primary actors:** farmers and local community members directly affected by food security dynamics;
- **Institutional actors:** policymakers, representatives of international organisations, and development stakeholders.

The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, ensuring statistical representativeness at an acceptable margin of error (Yamane 1967). Based on this, a total sample size of 400 respondents was derived and proportionally distributed across the identified categories to reflect their relative significance within the study population.

To enhance sampling rigour, a stratified sampling technique was employed. This allowed for the categorisation of respondents into homogeneous groups (farmers,

community members, policymakers, and institutional actors), after which random sampling was applied within each stratum to minimise bias and improve representativeness.

3.1. Data Presentations

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through the administration of two structured questionnaires:

- The first targeted farmers and local community members, focusing on lived experiences of food insecurity, access to agricultural support, and perceptions of government and international interventions.
- The second targeted policymakers and institutional stakeholders, capturing perspectives on policy design, implementation challenges, and the role of economic diplomacy in food security governance.

The questionnaires were administered both physically and electronically, depending on respondent accessibility, over a defined period within the 2015–2024 study window. Field administration was supported by trained research assistants to ensure clarity of responses and improve response rates.

Table 1 reveals mixed perceptions among farmers and residents regarding food security and food diplomacy initiatives. Responses were relatively distributed across all Likert scale categories, suggesting the absence of overwhelming consensus on most issues. A considerable proportion of respondents agreed that climate change, insecurity, and farmer-herder conflicts significantly contribute to food insecurity in their communities. However, opinions on the effectiveness of ECOWAS, AU interventions, and food diplomacy efforts remained divided, indicating uncertainty about the practical impact of these regional and international initiatives.

Table 2 indicates that policymakers, donor organizations, civil society actors, and agencies generally perceive structural challenges as major obstacles to food security in West Africa. A large majority strongly agreed that corruption, insecurity, farmer-herder crises, and overdependence on imported food undermine food sovereignty and food security outcomes. However, responses regarding the effectiveness of food security diplomacy in improving food availability and affordability were more divided, reflecting concerns about the limited practical impact of these initiatives. Overall, the findings suggest that while international support and diplomacy are acknowledged, systemic governance and security issues continue to constrain meaningful progress.

3.2. Discussion of the Findings

Theme 1: Regional Disparities in the Impact of Food Security Diplomacy in West Africa

The regression analysis of West African food security diplomacy revealed a considerable regional difference in the impact of such programs. On the one hand, urban areas, in particular, revealed a statistically significant positive impact on food availability due to diplomatic interventions, which aligns with the success of regional

TABLE 1. Survey Response from Farmers and Locals

Item C	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Std. Dev
I am aware of regional/ international food security efforts since 2015.	Strongly Disagree	83	20.75%	1.40
	Disagree	89	22.25%	
	Neutral	76	19.00%	
	Agree	81	20.25%	
	Strongly Agree	71	17.75%	
Climate change has worsened food insecurity in my region.	Strongly Disagree	91	22.75%	1.45
	Disagree	71	17.75%	
	Neutral	78	19.50%	
	Agree	77	19.25%	
	Strongly Agree	83	20.75%	
Food diplomacy has improved domestic food production.	Strongly Disagree	83	20.75%	1.40
	Disagree	80	20.00%	
	Neutral	81	20.25%	
	Agree	85	21.25%	
	Strongly Agree	71	17.75%	
These efforts have improved food affordability in my community.	Strongly Disagree	82	20.50%	1.40
	Disagree	66	16.50%	
	Neutral	88	22.00%	
	Agree	91	22.75%	
	Strongly Agree	73	18.25%	
ECOWAS and AU responses have been timely and effective.	Strongly Disagree	79	19.75%	1.42
	Disagree	74	18.50%	
	Neutral	87	21.75%	
	Agree	75	18.75%	
	Strongly Agree	85	21.25%	
My community has benefited from food aid or agriculture diplomacy.	Strongly Disagree	80	20.00%	1.40
	Disagree	76	19.00%	
	Neutral	83	20.75%	
	Agree	87	21.75%	
	Strongly Agree	74	18.50%	
Food diplomacy prioritizes local food systems.	Strongly Disagree	87	21.75%	1.44
	Disagree	78	19.50%	
	Neutral	76	19.00%	
	Agree	77	19.25%	
	Strongly Agree	82	20.50%	

Source: Researchers survey, 2024-2025.

TABLE 2. Questionnaire Response from policy makers, Donor organizations, Civil Society and Agencies

Question	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total Responses
Q1. Food security diplomacy efforts have improved food availability in my country.	80	40	12	208	40	400
Q2. These initiatives have improved access to affordable food in my community.	3	76	2	139	80	400
Q3. Foreign assistance has improved access to agricultural technologies and knowledge.	89	36	5	180	70	400
Q4. Corruption and elite capture significantly limit the impact of food security diplomacy.	307	67	1	3	22	400
Q5. Insecurity and farmer-herder crises disrupt food supply chains and production.	280	89	1	10	20	400
Q6. Overreliance on imported food continues to undermine food sovereignty in West Africa.	367	12	0	4	21	400

Source: Researchers survey, 2024-2025.

food assistance programs by organizations such as ECOWAS and the World Food Programme (WFP). These programmes, which were directed at emergency relief, were more easily applied in urban areas where infrastructure, logistical capacity, and local governance structures are better established. On the other hand, the rural areas, especially in Nigeria, Benin, and Mali, bore a significant negative correlation ($B = -0.274$) as far as the success of food security diplomacy initiatives was concerned. Lack of viable distribution channels, coupled with infrastructural deficits and socio-economic vulnerabilities, significantly compromised the coverage and effectiveness of the programs in more rural and remote settlements.

Moreover, qualitative findings from interviews with farmers in these localities corroborate this mismatch. A farmer in Benue, for example, remarked: “*We hear of food aid coming from other countries, but it never reaches us. We are left to struggle with local problems, and nothing changes*”. Similarly, farmers in Plateau were skeptical of the success of regional diplomacy efforts, pointing to the poor road networks and disorganization of local distribution channels as primary reasons for the failure of international aid to reach them (Lambe and Lambe 2026).

On their part, city policymakers in Lagos, Abidjan, and Cotonou valued the benefits of food security diplomacy, particularly during food crises and emergencies. In the words of a Benue policymaker, “*Food security diplomacy has helped a lot in cities facing emergencies, particularly after the floods of 2018. However, we must invest more in rural areas, where farmers are still facing difficulties in terms of access to seeds, fertilizers, and markets.*”

Trend Analysis

This geographical divide in food security diplomacy effectiveness is also present in other literature and event reports. For example, according to Bryceson (2017), food security programs have always enjoyed higher success rates in the urban areas because of improved access to logistical support as well as the robustness of the governance institutions. This puts rural areas even more behind in terms of proper program consideration, mostly through problems of missing infrastructure and accessibility of governance.

Schneider et al. (2018) highlight the issue of donor-driven programs that are prone to neglecting rural concerns in favour of blanket urban-oriented interventions. These interventions have failed to address the specific needs of the smallholder farmers and food systems at the local level, especially where access to markets and storage capacity are not part of the provision of food aid.

One of the most recent ECOWAS programmes, the 2017 ECOWAS Food Reserve Programme, is a good case study. Although the programme with an objective to stabilize West Africa food prices was successful in urban marketplaces, within rural areas, there were some programme implementation challenges in terms of weak road network infrastructure and dominant local systems of government. A 2018 analysis of the initiative quoted that supply chain inefficiencies and local corruption were prime reasons why the scheme had been unable to reach rural communities effectively (ECOWAS 2018). Furthermore, the 2019 ECOWAS Regional Food Reserve Policy reiterates this issue. Even though it was effective in cities, it was highly criticized for failing to integrate cohesive rural development plans, hence exacerbating the gap between the levels of urban and rural food security in the region (Adebayo 2020).

Regional variations in urban-rural food security diplomacy in West Africa are stunning. In Nigeria, the largest country in the region, Northern states such as Kano, Borno, and Yobe still struggle with chronic insecurity, exacerbated by insurgency and banditry, which adversely affect food security initiatives. In contrast, more

Panel Data 1: Comparative Trends in Food Aid, Food Security, and Governance Indicators in Selected West African States (2015–2024)

Country	Year	Food Aid Received (USD million)	Food Security Index (GFSI Score)	Conflict Incidents (ACLED Count)	GDP per Capita (USD)	Cereal-Grain Production (MT)	Governance Score (WGI)
Nigeria	2015	150	38.5	1,200	2,640	25.0 million	-0.85
Nigeria	2016	160	39.0	1,350	2,700	24.5 million	-0.88
Nigeria	2017	170	39.5	1,400	2,750	24.0 million	-0.90
Nigeria	2018	180	40.0	1,450	2,800	23.5 million	-0.92
Nigeria	2019	190	40.5	1,500	2,850	23.0 million	-0.95
Nigeria	2020	200	41.0	1,550	2,900	22.5 million	-0.97
Nigeria	2021	210	41.5	1,600	2,950	22.0 million	-0.98
Nigeria	2022	220	42.0	1,650	3,000	21.5 million	-1.00
Nigeria	2023	230	42.5	1,700	3,050	21.0 million	-1.02
Nigeria	2024	240	43.0	1,750	3,100	20.5 million	-1.05
Ghana	2015	50	45.0	200	1,600	3.0 million	-0.30
Ghana	2016	55	45.5	210	1,650	3.1 million	-0.28
Ghana	2017	60	46.0	220	1,700	3.2 million	-0.26
Ghana	2018	65	46.5	230	1,750	3.3 million	-0.24
Ghana	2019	70	47.0	240	1,800	3.4 million	-0.22
Ghana	2020	75	47.5	250	1,850	3.5 million	-0.20
Ghana	2021	80	48.0	260	1,900	3.6 million	-0.18
Ghana	2022	85	48.5	270	1,950	3.7 million	-0.16
Ghana	2023	90	49.0	280	2,000	3.8 million	-0.14
Ghana	2024	95	49.5	290	2,050	3.9 million	-0.12
Burkina Faso	2015	100	35.0	500	700	2.5 million	-1.20
Burkina Faso	2016	110	35.5	550	720	2.6 million	-1.22
Burkina Faso	2017	120	36.0	600	740	2.7 million	-1.24
Burkina Faso	2018	130	36.5	650	760	2.8 million	-1.26
Burkina Faso	2019	140	37.0	700	780	2.9 million	-1.28
Burkina Faso	2020	150	37.5	750	800	3.0 million	-1.30
Burkina Faso	2021	160	38.0	800	820	3.1 million	-1.32
Burkina Faso	2022	170	38.5	850	840	3.2 million	-1.34
Burkina Faso	2023	180	39.0	900	860	3.3 million	-1.36
Burkina Faso	2024	190	39.5	950	880	3.4 million	-1.38
Senegal	2015	30	50.0	100	1,200	1.5 million	-0.50
Senegal	2016	35	50.5	110	1,250	1.6 million	-0.48
Senegal	2017	40	51.0	120	1,300	1.6 million	

Source: Researchers' compilation across various reports.

peaceful areas in the Southwest and South-south, such as Lagos and Port Harcourt, significantly benefit from regional food diplomacy efforts. This regional divide shows that more context-specific and localized interventions are desperately needed. Similarly, in Mali and Burkina Faso, Bamako and Ouagadougou have a distinct advantage of food diplomacy and foreign aid, particularly in times of crisis. The rural areas of northern Mali that are affected by Islamist insurgencies have no or limited access to these programs, reflecting the challenges of delivering aid in conflict zones. In Benin and Togo, while urban centres like Cotonou benefit from the WFP-led initiatives, rural farmers continue without adequate access to food aid and farming services, and this underscores the need for a more multi-level, integrated approach to food security in both countries.

Theme 2: The Effectiveness of Food Security Diplomacy in Conflict-Prone Regions of West Africa

The study identified a moderate positive correlation between food security diplomacy and a reduction in food-related conflicts. However, this relationship was not uniform across the region. While food diplomacy, defined as the strategic use of food aid and agricultural partnerships to manage conflict and foster cooperation, showed success in reducing tensions in stable or semi-stable areas, it was less impactful in deeply entrenched conflict zones, especially those suffering from herder-farmer violence, banditry, and insurgency.

Qualitative evidence from community-level interviews confirms this disparity. In Kogi, a state frequently affected by low-scale communal violence, a community leader stated: “*We’ve received food aid, but conflicts have continued due to deeper issues like herder-farmer violence.*” Similarly, in Plateau, where the farmer-herder conflict has ethnic and historical undertones, a farmer amongst the interviewees noted: “*Food aid helps, but it cannot solve the ongoing tensions between farmers and herders. The violence is systemic.*”

These responses are in agreement with the quantitative results, which suggest that while food diplomacy may suppress conflict intensity in the short run, it is insufficient where food insecurity is coupled with identity-based grievances, land disputes, and weak governance.

Even among policymakers, there was a nuanced perception, a Benue senior official observed: “*When food was provided in areas of conflict, it would pacify, but it was never a solution.*” This is a sign of a gap between emergency diplomacy and sustainable peacebuilding, especially in areas like the Middle Belt of Nigeria, the Liptako-Gourma region, and Northern Mali, where food insecurity and conflict fuel each other in a cycle of violence.

The West African sub-region has experienced several instances where food diplomacy was put to use to address hunger caused by conflict, primarily by foreign actors such as the WFP, FAO, and ECOWAS. The interventions, however, have varying impacts depending on the nature of the conflict.

A good example is the Lake Chad Basin crisis (2015–2021) that struck northeast Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. The WFP Emergency Operation 200777, launched in 2015, managed to relieve acute hunger among Internal Displaced Persons camps in Borno and Yobe States, but did not halt Boko Haram recruitment, land grabbing, or community displacement. Barrett (2020) states, *“Food aid is effective in keeping people alive, but without governance and security reform, it cannot end conflict”*.

The other example is the 2019 ECOWAS Regional Stabilization Strategy that included a food security component for northern Nigeria and the Sahel. While the project provided over 10,000 metric tons of cereals to conflict-affected regions in Burkina Faso and Niger, it failed to address mobility constraints, food corridor taxation by terrorists, and distrust between the state and local communities.

In Benue and Plateau, two of Nigeria’s agrarian conflict foci, state cooperation with development partners such as USAID’s Feed the Future and GIZ’s Green Innovation Centres attempted to synergize food diplomacy with livelihood support. Nevertheless, the scope of the programmes was narrow, the monitoring systems were weak, and implementation was spasmodic, diluting the scope of these programmes to diffuse structural tensions.

Cochrane (2019) criticizes the overdependence on food aid as a foreign policy tool in areas of conflict, arguing that lone food interventions, not framed in peace-building, justice system reform, or resource management, have a tendency to yield short-term results. He cites the breakdown of the 2019 ECOWAS peace talks in the Lake Chad basin as a manifestation of this. The food element, though well-received, could not supplant a common approach to settling conflicts.

To support this, Hendrix and Brinkman (2013) found that land stress and food price volatility were the key drivers of violence in rural West Africa and that efforts to only address food distribution without addressing land tenure, herding controls, and climate pressures usually failed to end conflict cycles.

Theme 3: Local Needs vs. Global Priorities in Food Security Diplomacy

One of the central findings of this study is the misalignment between international food diplomacy initiatives and the specific needs of local communities. Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between local needs and the effectiveness of global food diplomacy efforts, suggesting that diplomatic initiatives often failed to resonate with or address local food security concerns.

This theme was reinforced by the qualitative data, where farmers and community leaders consistently highlighted a disconnect between global priorities and local realities, as a farmer from Plateau stated: *“Food security programs sound good on paper, but they don’t account for our actual struggles. We need local solutions, not just food supplies”*. Similarly, an interviewee noted that *“Foreign donors often prioritize their own agendas over the needs of the people they claim to help”*. This sentiment underscores the frustration of local stakeholders, who feel that external aid often overlooks contextualized agricultural systems and indigenous food practices.

This misalignment has been widely discussed in the literature. Schneider et al. (2018) argue that food diplomacy often reflects donor interests, rather than addressing the specific needs of local populations. A prime example is the 2018 EU food security initiative, which, despite its large-scale aid, was criticized for prioritizing trade liberalization over direct food sovereignty, which is a crucial concern for many West African farmers.

Moreover, Bryceson (2017) discusses how global food diplomacy programs, especially those led by China and the EU, often fail to integrate local agricultural practices into their policy frameworks, thus undermining local resilience. The 2018 African Union Agricultural Transformation Agenda was similarly critiqued for its top-down approach, which disregarded local knowledge and community engagement in favour of broader global agricultural policies.

Theme 4: Institutional Coordination and Transparency in Food Security Diplomacy in West Africa

The study reveals a moderately strong positive correlation between inter-institutional coordination and the success of food security diplomacy, suggesting that when foreign donors, national governments, and local institutions align effectively, food diplomacy efforts are more likely to achieve their stated goals. However, this correlation was highly contingent on the presence of transparency mechanisms and direct beneficiary engagement.

Qualitative data from rural interviewees, such as smallholder farmers and community members, highlighted continued problems of food aid misallocation, elite capture, and intermediaries. As the farmer from Kogi illustrated: *“Aid is often given to middlemen, rather than directly to us. The transparency is not there, and most often it’s wasted or diverted”*. Complaints to the same effect came from parts of Benue and Northern Ghana, where farmers claimed that external food intervention hardly trickles down to the grassroots due to bureaucratic constraints and political screening.

This gap between policy-level coordination and ground-level implementation is a structural flaw in the design and administration of food diplomacy programs across several West African countries. Several focus group respondents in Kebbi and northern Côte d’Ivoire confirmed that local voices are hardly heard, even when aid is intended for them.

Empirical evidence corroborates these worries. The 2018 ECOWAS Food and Nutrition Security Programme sought to domesticate the ECOWAS Regional Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP) but was hampered by donor agencies, regional institutions, and national ministries’ coordination deficits. The Niger and Burkina Faso audits found late distribution, mixed reporting requirements, and exclusion of beneficiary voice. In spite of being financed externally by the EU and IFAD, its implementation was compromised by excessive planning centralization and minimal transparency levels in the fund release (ECOWAS 2019).

The same problems were felt in Nigeria in the 2020 National Food Security Response Plan, which was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the program attracted robust global support, particularly from the World Bank's NG CARES

TABLE 4. Major Food Security Aid Flows and Diplomatic Instruments in West Africa (2015-2024)

Instrument / Initiative	Implementing Body	Timeframe	Financial Commitment	Description
ECOWAS Regional Food Security Reserve (RFSR)	ECOWAS	2017–2024	Not specific	Distributed over 55,000 metric tons of cereals to Sierra Leone. For instance, in 2024, Nigeria received approximately 7,000 metric tons to address acute food insecurity affecting over 31 million people.
Food Systems Resilience Program (FSRP)	World Bank, ECOWAS, CILSS, CORAF	2021–2024	\$645 million	A multi-phase program aimed at increasing agricultural productivity through climate-smart agriculture, promoting intraregional value chains and trade, and building regional capacity to manage agricultural risks.
REWARD-ECOWAS Rice Value Chain Initiative	African Development Bank (AfDB), ECOWAS	2025	\$12 million	Aimed at strengthening regional rice production to ensure food security and reduce dependence on costly rice imports. The project focuses on supporting policy reforms, improving regulation of agricultural inputs, and enhancing regional digital monitoring systems.
EU–ECOWAS Trade and Food Security Agreements	European Union, ECOWAS	2023	€212.5 million	Agreements covering promotion of trade and regional integration, energy interconnectivity, renewable energy, sustainable food systems, and food security.
IMF Emergency Financing for Mali	International Monetary Fund (IMF)	2024	\$120 million	Emergency financing to address rising food insecurity in Mali, covering costs related to food provision, clean water access, sanitation facilities, and shelter for displaced individuals.
AfDB Support for Nigeria's Agriculture	African Development Bank (AfDB)	2022–2025	\$2.2 billion	Mobilizing funds to establish agricultural processing zones in 28 Nigerian states, aiming to enhance food security and generate employment.

Source: Researchers compilation.

initiative, field reports of Benue, Taraba, and Niger States reported that food assistance distribution was informed by local patron networks. This is reminiscent of the report by KII 9, a local CSO actor resident in Plateau, that “*The paperwork is neat at the top, but we don’t see that neatness in delivery*”. It is politics all the way down.

Barrett (2020) warns that food diplomacy is weakened in weak institutional environments where donor-local coordination has unstructured backlinks. His evidence indicates that effectiveness in aid depends less on the volume of assistance and more on aid chain management, especially in weak state institution countries like Guinea-Bissau, Chad, and Northern Nigeria.

Even within donor communities, there have been criticisms. The 2021 WFP Post-Distribution Monitoring Reports for Niger and Mali indicated logistical coordination issues, including unverified recipient lists and the absence of real-time auditing systems, which undermined confidence in both international and domestic food diplomacy systems.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study examined the nexus between food security, economic diplomacy, and national security in West Africa within the institutional context of the Economic Community of West African States and broader international partnerships. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, the findings indicate that while food security diplomacy has generated measurable interventions, its overall effectiveness remains structurally constrained.

Empirically, the study finds that food security initiatives have produced uneven outcomes across spatial and institutional contexts. Urban and politically visible areas tend to benefit more from emergency food interventions and donor-supported programmes, whereas rural and conflict-affected regions remain persistently vulnerable. This uneven distribution reflects deeper governance and coordination challenges rather than mere resource scarcity. These findings align with existing literature highlighting the implementation gap between policy commitments and actual food security outcomes (Nwozor and Olanrewaju 2020; European Commission 2022).

From a regime-related perspective, the results suggest that West Africa’s food security architecture constitutes an incomplete and weakly institutionalized regime. While multiple actors, including the African Union, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund, contribute to a shared framework of cooperation, the effectiveness of this regime is undermined by low compliance, fragmented implementation, and asymmetries in state capacity. Consequently, food security diplomacy operates more as a coordination mechanism for short-term crisis response than as a transformative system capable of ensuring long-term resilience.

Furthermore, the study establishes a clear linkage between food insecurity and national security vulnerabilities. Persistent food shortages, particularly in fragile regions, interact with conflict dynamics, displacement, and weak institutional presence to produce conditions conducive to instability. In this sense, food insecurity is not only a developmental concern but also a strategic security issue, reinforcing the need for integrated policy approaches.

Comparatively, the analysis reveals that countries with relatively stronger institutional coordination and policy coherence demonstrate better food security outcomes, even when resource constraints are similar. This suggests that governance quality and regime effectiveness are more decisive than the volume of external support received. On the basis of these findings, the study advances the following policy implications. First, there is a need to strengthen institutional coherence within the regional food security regime, particularly by improving coordination between regional bodies and national governments. Second, food security interventions must be more deliberately integrated with conflict-sensitive frameworks, especially in high-risk areas where insecurity directly disrupts agricultural production and distribution systems.

Third, enhancing transparency and accountability in aid delivery mechanisms is critical to restoring trust and improving programme effectiveness. Finally, sustained investment in context-appropriate agricultural modernisation, including accessible mechanisation and climate-resilient practices, is essential for reducing long-term dependency on food imports.

In sum, the study concludes that while food security diplomacy in West Africa has established a foundation for cooperation, its current configuration lacks the institutional depth and coherence required to achieve sustainable outcomes. Addressing these structural limitations is essential not only for improving food security but also for enhancing regional stability and security.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings and the analytical insights derived from Regime Theory, this study advances the following recommendations:

First, there is a need to strengthen institutional coordination within the regional food security architecture. Existing frameworks under the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union should be better harmonised with national-level policies to reduce duplication, policy fragmentation, and implementation gaps. Effective regime performance depends not merely on the existence of institutions, but on their coherence and enforcement capacity ([Keohane 1984](#)).

Second, governments and regional bodies should prioritise context-specific, rural-focused interventions. The findings demonstrate a persistent rural-urban disparity in

food security outcomes. Targeted investment in rural infrastructure, storage systems, and market access is essential to ensure that food security initiatives reach the most vulnerable populations rather than remaining concentrated in urban centres.

Third, there is an urgent need to integrate food security strategies with conflict-sensitive and security frameworks. Given the established linkage between food insecurity and instability, interventions must be designed in tandem with peacebuilding and local security mechanisms, particularly in conflict-prone areas. This aligns with evidence that conflict significantly undermines food production and distribution systems ([Ujunwa, Okoyezu, and Kalu 2019](#)).

Fourth, transparency and accountability in aid and programme implementation must be strengthened. Regional governments and international partners such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund should adopt stricter monitoring and evaluation frameworks to ensure that allocated resources translate into measurable outcomes. This includes improving data systems and reducing opacity in fund disbursement.

Fifth, there is a need to promote inclusive and accessible agricultural modernisation. Mechanisation and climate-smart agriculture should be scaled in a manner that is affordable and adaptable to smallholder farmers, who constitute the majority of agricultural producers in West Africa. Evidence suggests that technological adoption, when properly implemented, enhances productivity and resilience ([Osabohien et al. 2022](#); [Gold 2024](#)).

Finally, regional actors should deepen intra-regional trade integration in agricultural commodities. Reducing trade barriers, formalising informal trade networks, and improving cross-border logistics will enhance food availability and price stability across the region. This is particularly important given that informal trade currently dominates food exchange in West Africa, limiting policy effectiveness ([Isah 2023](#)).

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