

Policy Brief: Enhancing Food Sovereignty in West Africa

Preamble

In 2023, approximately 733 million people worldwide faced hunger, with one in five in Africa, according to the latest State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) report.¹ The UN estimates a need for \$51.5 billion to provide life-saving support to 230 million at-risk individuals globally. Despite this crisis, the world's largest food corporations returned \$53.5 billion to shareholders during the 2021 and 2022 financial years, highlighting a troubling disconnect between corporate profits and human suffering.² These corporations 'earned' these profits during a period of unprecedented turmoil – a [global pandemic](#) and full-scale [war in Ukraine](#) – when global supply chains were disrupted and millions of people went hungry. While consumers in wealthier countries experienced moderate increases in food prices ranging from 3% to 4.5% in the UK, Canada, and the US during the initial months of the pandemic the impact on developing countries has been far more severe.

In West Africa, where over 450 million people reside, achieving food sovereignty is increasingly urgent as malnutrition rates soar and agricultural systems falter. The region faces a complex interplay of factors that have transformed its agricultural landscape, leading to a heavy reliance on foreign external inputs and imports, which undermines local food production, threatens food security and food sovereignty – making the country and her people vulnerable to external shocks, extortions and manipulations (when necessary).

The transformation of West Africa's agricultural systems from self-sufficient local practices to a reliance on corporate-controlled inputs and imported foods has profound implications for food sovereignty. As malnutrition rates rise and economic challenges mount, it is imperative for ECOWAS member states to reclaim control over their food systems by promoting sustainable agricultural practices that prioritize local production and reduce dependency on external sources. Only through concerted efforts can West Africa secure a healthier future for its population while preserving its cultural heritage related to food production and consumption.

Aim of the Policy Brief

This policy brief aims to highlight the critical importance of food sovereignty in West Africa and outline actionable recommendations for ECOWAS to reclaim control over local food systems. It seeks to address the challenges posed by corporate control, dependency on imports, and ineffective agricultural policies while advocating for sustainable practices that empower local communities and smallholder farmers.

Current State of Food Sovereignty in West Africa

West Africa's population is projected to double by 2050, with 61% involved in agriculture. However, malnutrition remains a critical issue; 16.7 million children under five are acutely malnourished and over two-thirds of households cannot afford healthy diets.³

¹ WHO - The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2024. Financing to end hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms. 24 July 2024

² Davi Martins (2 March 2023): Food corporations paid shareholders \$53.5bn while millions went hungry. Open Democracy. (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/greenpeace-food-corporations-shareholders-535-billion-millions-hungry/>)

³ Global Nutrition Report (2022) – West Africa – Global Nutritional Report. <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/africa/western-africa/>

The World Food Program reports that nearly 55 million people in West and Central Africa will struggle to feed themselves during the 2024 lean season. This figure represents a fourfold increase over the last five years, driven by economic challenges such as currency devaluations, soaring inflation, stagnating production, and trade barriers.⁴ Countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Mali are among the hardest hit.

Changing Agricultural Systems

Historically, West Africa was characterized by diverse agricultural practices rooted in local knowledge and traditional subsistence farming methods- that produced more than enough food for households, communities and local trading; the environment flourished. However, the advent of globalization and neo-colonial influences has significantly altered this landscape. The shift towards industrial agriculture has led to an increased dependence on transnational corporations (TNCs) for essential farm inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides.⁵ This dependency has been exacerbated by the promotion of monoculture practices, which prioritize high-yield crops often controlled by large agribusinesses.

As a result, local farmers have found themselves at the mercy of corporate interests that dictate prices and availability of agricultural inputs. This reliance on imports not only compromises food sovereignty but also exposes the population to global market fluctuations and trade policies that may not favour their needs.

Impact of Corporate Control

The concentration of agricultural production in the hands of a few corporations—such as Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Cargill, and Dreyfus—has further eroded local agricultural systems. These companies control up to 90% of the global grain trade and are not required to disclose vital information about their operations.⁶ This lack of transparency and lobby influence on seed patent laws, allows them to own and control seed distribution, manipulate grain prices to maximize profits while local farmers struggle to compete, while losing rights and access to local indigenous seeds species that go extinct due to the use of toxic pesticides.

In addition to controlling inputs, these corporations often influence national policies that prioritize export-oriented agriculture over local food needs. This shift has led to weak local food policies that fail to support sustainable agricultural development. As smallholder farmers face economic pressures from subsidized imports and corporate farming practices, their ability to contribute to local food systems diminishes.

Economic Challenges

Economic factors further exacerbate these issues. Soaring inflation rates across ECOWAS countries have made food increasingly unaffordable for many households. Food prices have consistently been the main driver of inflation in West Africa. For instance, between January 1999 and October 2022, food contributed an average of 1.2 percentage points to the overall inflation rate of 2.3 percent in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU).⁷ In Nigeria alone, food inflation exceeded

⁴ Global Nutrition Report (2022) – West Africa – Global Nutritional Report. <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/africa/western-africa/>

⁵ Haruna M.S (2017): Overview of British Colonial Policies on Agriculture in Muri Emirate, 1903-1960. The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies (ISSN 2321 - 9203). Volume 5 Issue 2. May 2017 pg

⁶ Agriculture Nigeria (2022): History of "Agriculture in Nigeria by Jerry Alahira <https://www.agriculturenigeria.com/history-of-agriculture-in-nigeria/>

⁷ Melo Fernandes, C. (2023). Inflation Dynamics in the West African Economic and Monetary Union: WAEMU. *Selected Issues Papers, 2023(038), A001*. Retrieved Oct 10, 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400245886.018.A001>

34% as of May 2024, driven by rising prices for staples due to supply shortages and insecurity. Similar trends are observed in Ghana (23%), Sierra Leone (54%), Liberia (10%), The Gambia (16%), and Togo (7%), where food prices have surged dramatically compared to previous years.

Currency devaluations and trade barriers that hinder access to affordable food compound this inflationary pressure. The region's heavy reliance on imports means that fluctuations in global markets can lead to significant price volatility, further threatening food sovereignty.

West and Central Africa remain heavily dependent on imports to meet the population's food needs. Import bills continue to rise due to currency depreciation and high inflation, even as countries struggle with significant fiscal constraints and macroeconomic challenges. Cereal production for the 2023-2024 agricultural season shows a deficit of 12 million tons in the region, while the per capita availability of cereals is down by two per cent compared to the last agricultural season. When a country heavily relies on food imports and external farm inputs, it becomes vulnerable to external shocks such as FOREX volatility, international politics and conflict, debts, sanctions, etc. All of these erode the food sovereignty of the locals in the country and inform significant inflationary pressure.

Indicators of Loss of Food Sovereignty

1. Heavy Dependence on Imports: Countries like Mali rely heavily on imports to meet their food needs; approximately 53% of its imports consist of petroleum oils and essential food products. The total agricultural import expenditure is estimated at around \$1 billion.⁸

The growing demand-supply gap in staple foods has led Nigeria to increase its agricultural imports. Between 2016 and 2019, cumulative agricultural imports reached approximately ₦3.35 trillion. According to the International Trade Administration (2023), Nigeria relies on \$10 billion of imports to meet its food and agricultural production shortfalls (mostly wheat, rice, poultry, fish, food services, and consumer-oriented foods). Nigeria's food and beverage import bill increased by 30% from N 1.21 trillion in the fourth quarter of 2023 to N1.59 trillion in the first three months of 2024.⁹

Senegal depends on imports for around 70 percent of its food supply. The main agricultural imports include rice, wheat, corn, onions, palm oil, dairy products, fresh vegetables, sugar, potatoes, and ingredients for food processing.¹⁰

Togo's food import landscape is characterized by a significant reliance on external sources to meet its domestic consumption needs. As of recent data, Togo imports approximately 50% of its food, with major imports including rice, wheat, and vegetable oils. In 2021, Togo's agricultural import bill was estimated at \$600 million or CFA214 billion worth of food products.¹¹

In 2022, Ghana's agricultural import expenditure reached approximately \$2.6 billion, with key imports including rice, poultry, and dairy products. The high demand for these products is

⁸ Tralac (2019): Mali Intra-Africa Trade and Tariff Profile <https://www.tralac.org/documents/publications/trade-data-analysis/2713-mali-intra-africa-trade-and-tariff-profile-march-2019/file.html>

⁹ International Trade Administration, Nigeria – Country Commercial Guide – Agriculture Sector. Available from: <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/nigeria-agriculture-sector>

¹⁰ International Trade Administration – Senegal Commercial Guide.: agricultural Sector <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/senegal-agricultural-sector>

¹¹ Togo First (18 November 2022): Togo imported CFA214 billion of food products in 2021. <https://www.togofirst.com/en/agriculture/1811-10969-togo-imported-cfa214-billion-of-food-products-in-2021>

driven by a growing middle class that increasingly seeks diverse and convenient food options. For instance, Ghana imports [55% of the rice](#)¹² that is consumed locally.

Like Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Niger, imports between 30% - 40% of food supply import. West African countries, including Ghana, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire, import large quantities of fertilizer, much of it from Russia and other global suppliers. In 2022, the global fertilizer crisis exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine war caused prices to soar by 300%. This drastically reduced fertilizer usage in many West African countries, leading to lower crop yields. Between 2018 and 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the global average price of fertilizer fell by 20.6%. During this period, Ghana nearly doubled its fertilizer imports, increasing from 315,157 tons in 2018 to 618,638 metric tons in 2020. However, after the pandemic hit, global fertilizer prices surged by 98%, prompting Ghana to cut its imports by 61%. The situation was further exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which drove fertilizer prices to USD 628 per ton by March 2022, leading to further reductions in Ghana's imports. This has strained fertilizer supply and pushed up domestic prices.¹³

2. Corporate Control Over Agriculture: Four companies—Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Cargill, and Dreyfus—control up to 90% of the global grain trade. This concentration allows them to manipulate prices without accountability. Four major companies control about two-thirds of the market, with Bayer leading the pack, generating over €20 billion in revenue from its "crop protection" business. Following Bayer are Syngenta, which is based in Switzerland and owned by state-run ChemChina, Corteva, created from DuPont and Dow in the US, and another German chemical giant, BASF.¹⁴

The bigger a multinational, the more power it has to lobby politicians and to influence legislation through non-profit groups like CropLife; - pushing laws and policies to ease the operations of their proprietors.¹⁵

3. Weak Local Food Policies: National policies often prioritize international trade agreements over local agricultural development, further eroding community capacity to produce food sustainably.
4. Loss of Agricultural Biodiversity: The decline in diverse local crops due to monoculture practices reduces resilience against pests and climate change impacts.
5. Marginalization of Small Farmers: Economic pressures from subsidized imports diminish smallholder farmers' ability to sustain themselves.
6. Environmental Degradation: Unsustainable agricultural practices promoted by external entities can lead to soil degradation, loss of water resources, and biodiversity loss.
7. Soaring Inflation: Inflation rates across ECOWAS countries have skyrocketed, with food inflation being a significant component of overall inflation rates. For example, Nigeria's food inflation exceeded 34% as of May 2024. In Ghana, food prices have surged by approximately

¹² Sylvanus Kwaku Afesorgbor (January 22, 2024): Ghana wants to make importing food like rice and tomatoes more costly: expert explains why it's a bad idea. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/ghana-wants-to-make-importing-food-like-rice-and-tomatoes-more-costly-expert-explains-why-its-a-bad-idea-219513>

¹³ African Union – Dakar 2: Ghana Country Food and Agriculture Delivery Compact. https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/ghana_country_food_and_agriculture_delivery_compact.pdf

¹⁴ Pesticide Atlas (2020)

¹⁵ Dataphy Nigeria (December 2021): 15 Faults with the Bill to Establish Nigerian Pesticide Council – Group <https://www.dataphyte.com/latest-reports/15-faults-with-the-bill-to-establish-nigerian-pesticide-council-group/>

23%, while Sierra Leone has experienced a staggering 54% increase in food prices compared to previous years. This inflationary pressure not only affects access to food but also exacerbates poverty levels across the region.

8. Regulatory Influence and Toxic Alliances with Government and Global Bodies: CropLife actively lobbies for favourable regulations on GMOs and pesticides, shaping policies that prioritize corporate interests over local agricultural needs and undermine national food sovereignty. In Nigeria and globally, CropLife partners with government ministries and food regulatory agencies, co-finances projects, and collaborates with bodies like ECOWAS and FAO. These alliances weaken regulations and shift development programs to serve CropLife's members, rather than protecting local rights, sustainable food production, and biodiversity.¹⁶

Recommended Actions for ECOWAS

To address these pressing challenges and enhance food sovereignty in West Africa, ECOWAS should consider the following recommendations:

1. Revise National Agricultural Policies: Encourage member states to prioritize food sovereignty through mainstreaming Agroecology to encourage local food production while promoting intra-regional trade in agricultural products.
2. Encourages ECOWAS Governments to increase support for small holder farmers who produce the bulk of the food consumed in the region through sufficient budget allocations, subsidies, incentives and provision of basic infrastructure.
3. End Toxic Alliances with Agro-Corporations: Disengage from partnerships that prioritize profit over public health and environmental sustainability.
4. Promote Sustainable and Agroecological Farming Practices: Promote agroecological farming practices that enhance biodiversity, improve soil health, and reduce reliance on chemical inputs especially among the smallholder farmers that feed the continent.
5. Call on ECOWAS Heads of Government Regarding HHPs: Urge ECOWAS leaders to demand that EU parliaments and other countries cease exporting highly hazardous pesticides (HHPs) banned in Europe to Africa; what poses a danger to European health is equally hazardous to African health.
6. Increase Investment in Agricultural Research: Focus on indigenous crops and traditional farming practices that are resilient to climate change while fostering innovation that enhances agricultural production.
7. Urge the EU to Halt Exports of Banned Pesticides: Use diplomatic channels to call on the EU and other countries to stop exporting highly hazardous pesticides that are banned in Europe but still find their way into African markets.
8. Adopt Harmonized International Standards on Pesticide Usage: Push for consistent standards regarding pesticide use for both domestic production and imports. Strengthen the implementation of Regulation C/REG 3/05/08 by advocating for consistent standards regarding pesticide registration and usage across the ECOWAS region.

¹⁶ PAN Europe (19 January 2024): The end of the Toxic Alliance with Pesticide Industry. <https://www.pan-europe.info/blog/end-fao%E2%80%99s-toxic-alliance-pesticide-industry>

9. Establish Regional Monitoring Bodies: Create or strengthen organizations dedicated to monitoring pesticide importation and usage compliance with ECOWAS and international standards.
10. Secure Favourable Land Tenure Systems for Farmers: Advocate for policies that guarantee land tenure rights for smallholder farmers, ensuring stable access to land for sustainable agriculture. Support community-based land management initiatives in the region that empower local communities in decision-making about land use.
11. Establish a Regional Framework on GMOs: Develop a comprehensive policy framework that regulates the use of GMOs in agriculture. This framework should prioritize biosafety, biodiversity, environmental sustainability, preservation of indigenous seeds and knowledge and cultural diversity.
12. Review Patent Laws to Protect Local Farmers: Advocate for the revision of patent laws to ensure that they do not disproportionately favor large agribusinesses at the expense of smallholder farmers. Implement measures that protect traditional knowledge and local seed varieties, allowing farmers to save and exchange seeds without facing legal repercussions.
13. Promote Transparency in Corporate Practices: Implement regulations requiring transparency from corporations involved in agriculture regarding their practices, pricing, and supply chains. This will help mitigate the negative impacts of corporate control over local food systems and ensure that local producers are not exploited.
14. Establish a Food Sovereignty Task Force: Create a dedicated task force within ECOWAS focused on food sovereignty issues. This task force should work collaboratively with civil society organizations (CSOs), farmers' groups, and other stakeholders to monitor developments related to GMOs, patent laws, and corporate interests while advocating for policies that prioritize local food systems.
15. Facilitate Regional Cooperation: Encourage collaboration among member states to share best practices related to agricultural policies, GMO regulations, and corporate accountability. This cooperation can help build a unified approach to protecting food sovereignty across the region.
16. Conduct Research on Impacts of GMOs: Support research initiatives that assess the socio-economic and environmental impacts of GMOs in West Africa. This research should inform policy decisions and provide evidence-based recommendations for sustainable agricultural practices.
17. Engage in Public Awareness Campaigns: Launch campaigns aimed at educating the public about the implications of GMOs, patent laws, and corporate control over agriculture. Empowering consumers with knowledge can foster greater demand for locally produced foods and sustainable farming practices.
18. Call for International Support Against Corporate Exploitation: Engage with international bodies to advocate against exploitative practices by multinational corporations in West African agriculture. This includes pushing for fair trade agreements that prioritize local producers over corporate interests.
19. Ensure active consultation, participation and involvement of farmers and relevant CSOs in decision making on food and agriculture.

Conclusion

The challenges facing food sovereignty in West Africa are urgent and multifaceted. By implementing these recommendations, ECOWAS can take significant steps toward reclaiming control over local food systems, ensuring that future generations have access to healthy, culturally appropriate food

produced sustainably. This approach addresses immediate concerns about hunger while fostering long-term resilience against external shocks and promoting community well-being across the region.