

COVID-19 and the Looming Food Insecurity and Poverty: The Need for Sustainable Food Production in Nigeria

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Article History

Received : 10 February 2021

Revised : 17 February 2021

Accepted : 26 February 2021

Published : 5 June 2021

Key words

COVID-19, Food Insecurity,
Poverty, Food Production,
Nigeria

JEL Classification Code:

H51, H52 & H57

Abstract: One of the greatest concerns surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak is the impact it will have on food security and poverty, especially in countries that are already depending of food import. Nigeria is reportedly suffering from relative food insecurity and weak economy, which may worsen due to the long-term effects of COVID-19. Using only statistical illustrations, the study examined COVID-19 and the looming food insecurity in Nigeria. It was uncovered that despite the huge agricultural potentials and numerous food production policies put in place by the Nigerian government, food production has not been sustainable and the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened food supply situation. This has resulted into escalating food prices and food import across the country and increasing debt burden for management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following from the above, poverty rate has continued to hike amidst greater economic potentials. To avert further damage on food production situation in Nigeria, it was recommended that farmers in Nigeria be granted immediate exemption from the COVID-19 lockdown and should as well be provided with the necessary hybrid inputs like fertilizers for improved planting season and harvest. Also, the on-going government policies on food production should be seriously conducted and monitored across the nation and a drastic action taken against internal insecurity caused mainly Boko Haram and Fulani insurgents.

1. Introduction

The economic consequences of complete lockdown and the uncertainty trends caused by the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic which broke out from the ancient city of

Wuhan in China has resulted into a new great decline in the growth of the global economy. Apart from the huge death toll witnessed, the effect, spread and contagion signifies that the global economy has become substantially more interconnected and China plays a far greater role in global output, trade, tourism, infrastructure and commodity market (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2020). This role of China has magnified the economic spillovers to other countries from an adverse shock in China (Zhu, Liu, Wei and Ouyang, 2020). Also added to the combustion is the recent trade policy tension between US-China which almost stagnated industrial production in the late 2019 when the growth of consumer spending lost its aggregate momentum in the developed economies (International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2020).

Conservative statistics emerging from the OECD shows very severe and negative consequences of the pandemic on the global and individual economies of the world. Globally, the economy was forecasted by the OECD (2020) to truncate from 2.9% annual growth rate in 2019 to 2.4% in 2020 but would recovery to 3.4% in 2021. China, having shown an exceptional competence in combating and truncating the effect of COVID-19 and spillovers to other countries with a gradual recovery in output and demand, was forecasted to decline from 6.1% growth in 2019 to 4.9% in 2020 and quickly recovers with leading growth rate of 6.7% in 2021. US economy was forecasted to lag far behind China with a growth rate of 2.3%, 1.9% and 2.1% in 2019, 2020 and 2021 respectively.

In Africa, South Africa was forecasted to slump to 0.6% growth rate in 2020 from 1.2% in 2019 with the capacity to recover to 1.0% in 2021. Regrettably, Nigeria's economic growth rate was shown to recess into -0.9% in 2020 from 1.2% in 2009 and further depress to -1.2% in 2021 (OECD, 2020). This entails that the effect of COVID-19 on global economies may depend partly on the spillovers from China and partly on the vulnerabilities prevalent within the economy itself (Susanne, 2020). Furthermore, the effects on national economies may depend to some extent on the way producers, consumers, businesses, and governments have responded to the pandemic.

There is however different concerns from different people depending on their interest in the national and global economy. While epidemiologists are concerned mostly about the rapid spread of the virus, economists are worried about the pandemic's already visible and potential economic damage. Economists are almost unanimous that the outbreak has greatly affected global food supply chains and may

induce food scarcity and worsen poverty in developing economies (IMF, 2020). This is evident from the previous pandemics, including cholera, Spanish flu, avian influenza and ebola, which led to food price hikes and market panics in the affected economies (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2020).

Report of the World Food Programme (2020) shows the number of hungry and malnourished people around the world to accelerate due to increase in violent conflicts and climate change impacts. Today, over 800 million people face chronic undernourishment and over 100 million people are in need of lifesaving food assistance. Worst is the fact that 14 million people in Latin America are reportedly food insecure (Report of the World Food Programme, 2020). This may be due to the added impact of COVID-19 which undermines the efforts of humanitarian and food security organizations seeking to reduce undernourishment. It is not easy to forget the considerable risk to refugee populations. Again, more people are displaced from their homes because of violence, conflict and persecution than at any other time since the Second World War (IMF, 2020). Many of those who have left their countries are living in camps. Refugee populations living in close proximity to one another, and lacking adequate medical facilities, are at an especially elevated risk from COVID-19.

The urgent and dual challenge before economic experts remains how to disburse accurate information literacy to both the government and food producers on one hand and the general population on the other. The government need to know and maintain her peculiar roles in truncating the effect of the pandemic and at the same time sustaining food production activities through farming exemptions and subsidies, while the general public requires precautionary information to prevent spread and contagion. The IMF (2020) report shows that even though, the coverage of COVID-19 has dominated the media, but at the same time there have been reports of misinformation around the virus spreading, particularly through social media channels and messaging platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. To this end, the informative and awareness role of the media cannot be overemphasized in Nigeria.

Furthermore, there is the need to acknowledge that while other governments around the world are suffering from a shortage of ventilators, hospital beds, and personal protective equipment, availability of these items is already extremely limited in Nigeria. Federal government and most states of the federation have only a few ventilators available to aid the populations, and there is also a lack of reliable oxygen supplies, intensive care units (ICUs), and healthcare workers to treat the sick.

Additionally, Nigeria is already suffering from relative food insecurity and weak economy, which will worsen the long-term effects of COVID-19. Thus, one of the greatest concerns surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak is the impact it will have on food security and poverty, especially in a country that is already suffering with high food import. The United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), (2020) has already warned of an impending food crisis if genuine and sustainable actions are not taken to protect supply chains and distribute food to vulnerable populations.

It is against this backdrop that the author is out to examine COVID-19 and the looming food insecurity and poverty in Nigeria and how best food production can be sustained in the country. For clarity of purpose, the article comprises of essential segments. The foregoing is the introduction; next to it are the conceptual clarifications on issues relating to food security and poverty in Nigeria, COVID-19 and food insecurity and poverty in Nigeria, the role of government in sustaining food production and finally, conclusion and policy recommendations provides the end to the paper.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

2.1. Food Insecurity in Nigeria

There are varying views on the concept of food security or insecurity and hence the two are used interchangeably. The World Bank (1986) considers food security as the situation in which all people have access to enough food to live healthy and productive lives. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Africa in 1986 sees food security as a condition in which *“all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs for a productive and healthy life”*.

Food security is therefore depending on some important economic variants prominent of which are: agricultural production, food imports and donations, employment opportunities and income earnings, intra-household decision-making and resource allocation, health care utilization and caring practices (Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992). However, because there are concerns that such approaches can be too costly, too complicated or take too long to show results, institutions may not invest their scarce resources in implementing them. Moreover, household food security issues cannot be seen in isolation from broader factors such as physical, policy and social environment (Hoddinott, 2001).

The World Bank (2001) further opined that food security is of three types: food availability, food accessibility and food affordability. Food availability for farming households means ensuring sufficient food for the households through production. However, it should be noted that simply making food available is not enough; one must also be able to purchase it, especially the low income households (Sen, 1981). Hence, food security connotes physical and economic access to adequate food for all household members, without undue risk of losing the access. The concept of food security has expanded beyond the strict biological requirements of sustenance for survival. Food security does include consuming at a level adequate for physical and mental health and also includes the right to cultural preferences. It also includes obtaining the food in appropriate proportion (Robertson, 1990). Food security therefore involves interconnected domains, with questions of agriculture, society, environment, employment and income, marketing, health and nutrition, and public policy.

Food security is a wide concept that has many variants. It simply connotes access to adequate food for a healthy living. This explanation points to at least two components of this complex concept. That is access to available food and adequate nutrient intake for sustainable healthy living. The Economists (2014) adds that food security requires an available and reliable food supply at all times. It is imperative to state that at the global, regional and national levels, food supply can be affected by climate change, natural disasters like the current COVID-19, war, civil unrest, population growth, lack of effective agricultural practices, and restrictions to trade like the current scenario (Susanne, 2020).

At the community level, food security is essentially a matter of access to food. Insecurity can be temporary or chronic. It may vary with age, status, gender, education, income, geographic location and ethnicity. Poverty is the main cause and hence sustainable progress in poverty reduction is critical to improve access to food. Individuals need access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. They need adequate health services, and a healthy and secure environment, including a safe water supply. Food security is therefore closely linked to the economic and social health of a nation, society and individual.

The defining characteristics of very low food security also known as food insecurity are that, at times during the year, the food intake of household members is reduced and their normal eating patterns are disrupted because the household lacks money and other resources for food. Hunger refer to a potential consequence

of food insecurity that because of prolonged involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation. An acceptable shorthand terms for food insecurity are “*hungry, or at risk of hunger,*” and “*hungry, or faced the threat of hunger*”.

For the purpose of this article, the FAO (2013) definition of food insecurity is adopted to the effect that, it is a situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. It may be caused by the unavailability of food, insufficient purchasing power, inappropriate distribution or inadequate use of food at the household level. Food insecurity, poor conditions of health and sanitation and inappropriate care and feeding practices are the major causes of poor nutritional status.

In all fairness however, the Nigerian government has not completely ignored the effect of food insecurity and poverty on the populace. Over the last few years, in order to combat threats of famine and pervasive poverty thereby ensuring food security for its population, the recent Nigerian government strategy through the Anchor Borrowers Scheme has rested on increasing the availability of food grains through significant investments in agricultural technologies that are high yielding varieties of seeds and fertilizer, services such as extension, credit and inputs, and rural infrastructure like roads and local markets (Ehiabhi, 2019).

Unfortunately, the continued devastating effect of the Boko Haram attacks and insurgency in the North are having its impact on other states in the country, especially when it has to do with the supply of foodstuffs (Hemenga, 2019). It has particularly affected food items such as pepper and tomatoes, which mostly come from the Northern states. The supply of these two major food items, which happen to be part of every delicacy in an average home, is in short supply, especially in Lagos where a handful is sold at a very costly price. This therefore implies that the insurgency in the North has not only caused scarcity of certain commodities but has also affected the prices of these commodities in the market and may likely add its impetus on COVID-19 in creating food insecurity in Nigeria.

2.2. Poverty in Nigeria

Across the world, almost every country has to face the problem of poverty. Poverty is the condition in which low-income people cannot meet their basic needs of life (Bichanga and Njage, 2014 and Taiwo, Agwu, Aregan and Ikpefan, 2016). This

situation leads to many difficulties like decreased health facilities, high illiteracy rate, decreased quality of life etc., these difficulties motivate human beings to commit heinous crimes and sometimes suicide. Poverty can also be regarded as the situation of having not enough money to meet the basic needs of human beings.

In its broadest level, it can be conceived as a state of deprivation prohibitive of decent human life. This according to Ehiabhi (2019) and Nwigwe and Omonona (2016) is caused by lack of resources and capabilities to acquire basic human needs as seen in many, but often mutually reinforcing parameters which include malnutrition, ignorance, prevalence of diseases, squalid surroundings, high infant, child and maternal mortality, low life expectancy, low per capita income, poor quality housing, inadequate clothing, low technological utilization, environmental degradation, unemployment, rural-urban migration and poor communication. Poverty is caused by both internal and external factors. Whereas the internal causes can be clustered into economic, environmental and social factors, the external causes relate to international trade, the debt burden and the refugee problem.

Statistics shows that over the developing countries of the world, the larger percentage of the population is poor and lives in the rural areas. In the words of Akosile, (2014) and Awojobi, (2014), the poor are essentially engage in agricultural and micro-enterprises and constitute the informal sector and medium scale enterprises. According to Oshinowo (2017), Nigeria is no exception because in the country, poverty is pervasive with frightening depth and breadth. It affects all geopolitical zones of the country. The poor in Nigeria like those elsewhere are powerless, voiceless, lack basics of life and are generally deprived. Poor people have insufficient income, lack access to basic services, have limited access to credit and shelter, they survive on menial jobs and can barely afford to send their children to school (Idowu and Oyeleye, 2012).

There are statistical facts that poverty is indeed increasing in Nigeria, based on the poverty assessment study recently conducted by Ehiabhi (2019). Attacking poverty will therefore depend to some extent on the deeper understanding of the meaning and causes of poverty. The fact that economic development continues to be central to success in reducing poverty, and that poverty is also an outcome of economic, social and political processes that interact with and reinforce each other in ways that can ease or exacerbate the state of deprivation in which poor people live, the government of Nigeria has tried over the years to reduce poverty by initiating different policies and programmes to alleviate it.

Some of these programmes include: Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFFRI), Better Life Programme (BLP), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), People Bank of Nigeria (PBN), Bank of Agriculture (BOA), Bank of Industry (BOI), Microfinance Bank, Poverty Eradication Programme (PEP), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), Sure-P, N-Power and the Primary School Feeding Programme whose aim were to ameliorate the suffering of the people by providing them employment opportunities and access to credit facilities to enable them establish their own businesses (Taiwo, Agwu, Aregan and Ikpefan, 2016).

Despite these laudable programmes, the level of poverty in Nigeria still remains quite alarming. The incidence, depth and severity of poverty in Nigeria have been reportedly high. For instance, Omotola (2008) alleged that about 70% of Nigeria population wallow in penury. Soludo (2006) adds that in a robust economy, nothing works well without focusing on programmes or activities which are targeted at poverty reduction via empowerment of individuals through increased accessibility soft micro-credit. Institutional systems of the financial sectors have to be improved upon with good motivation scheme created for microfinance institutions and employees in meeting the new trend in the corporate business world. The outbreak of COVID-19 is thus seen as the last straw that would break the camel's back as far as poverty and food insecurity in Nigeria are concerned.

3. COVID-19, Food Insecurity and Poverty in Nigeria

In Nigeria, following the outbreak of COVID-19, prices of staple crops like yam, wheat, maize, and rice have remained very high with no slight indices to decline. For instance, the price of rice has remained conspicuously high with up to 35% increment (Gisaor, 2020). This is worsened by the running inflation of 13% reportedly recorded by Nigeria during the first quarter report of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) (2020). With the prolonged lockdown, food distribution channels have faced severe disruptions from transport interruptions and quarantine measures. Also, of paramount importance is the fact that the lockdown has coincidentally correspond with the planting season in Nigeria and in most African countries. With the continued total lockdown and closure of rural markets, farmers are faced with enormous difficulties in securing good and quality hybrid seeds for cultivation. There is thus, the perceived negative impact on July/August 2020 harvest across the entire African continent.

It is imperative to note that Africa's 1.2 billion people face the highest percentage of undernourishment on the planet, affecting over 20% of the population (Gisaor, 2020). The palpable fear remains that the COVID-19 virus might prove especially deadly for those who are elderly or whose health has already been compromised. This includes people suffering from malnourishment. This is in addition to the impacts of farmers leaving their fields fallow or facing delays in planting and harvesting because of sickness and breakdowns in non-food supply chains, like fertilizer and other critical inputs that may ultimately impact most on developing country economies.

COVID-19 is seen by agricultural experts such as Susanne (2020) as a natural disaster but the prolonged lockdown is considered a human disaster, an attempt to add to already recent negative developments, especially the frequent clashes between herdsman and farmers in the predominantly farming areas of the Middle Belt region of Nigeria which has resulted in the destruction of lives and farmlands, have become a major threat to efforts to boost food production. From Benue to Taraba, Nasarawa and Plateau in the North Central region and Zamfara and Southern Kaduna States in the North West, clashes between farmers and herdsman have left in its trail heavy losses of lives and property. These losses of lives have adversely affected farming activities and other related businesses. This has resulted in a drastic reduction in farm outputs, a development that has heightened the fear of hunger.

Beyond Nigeria, hunger is likely to increase in many countries where the economy has slowed down or contracted, mostly in middle or low income countries. Economic decline, poverty and food insecurity often accompany one another (GeoPoll, 2020). Thus, economic decline due to COVID-19 would have negative impact on poverty and food insecurity. The shortage of products and ever increasing prices of staple foods would likely create unsettling sentiments across the farming communities, dampening the country's efforts to end poverty. In fact, there were estimates that more than 65% of the Nigerian population were food insecure while 70% were living below the poverty line (Osagie, 2013). Uneven pace of economic recovery and continuing poor economic performance in many countries after the 2008–2009 global economic downturns have also undermined efforts to end poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Global food security and poverty eradication programmes faces additional risks if humanitarian and development resources are diverted away from them to combat COVID-19.

Already, Nigeria remains a net food importer, and her dependence on imports is growing. In the case of rice, since the implementation of high tariffs for rice importation, legal imports into the country have come to a standstill, creating a massive demand from staple consumers. In the absence of local paddy production to meet this demand, smugglers have been having a free ride, pumping rice into the country through the borders. Income inequality has become a source of food insecurity common to Nigeria. Other common perpetrators of food insecurity in Nigeria are unemployment and the welfare crisis. Food price shocks may soon originate and continue with other forms of conflict and, more generally, political instability. The World Bank (2014) reports that in 51 riots in 37 countries over the last eight years, food was the principal consideration and Nigeria may not be far from this position except urgent steps are taken.

4. The Need for Sustainable Food Production in Nigeria.

The UN (2020) defined sustainable development as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This entails that food production in Nigeria should be carried out in such a stupendous manner as to provide enough food for the teeming population as well as prevent food insecurity, hunger and poverty among the future generations and hence some of the goals of sustainable development include zero hunger, zero poverty and good health achievable in 2030.

Nigeria has no reasonable excuse to fail in this regard considering her huge agricultural capabilities ranging from massive deposit of fertile alluvial soil conducive for food production and growing energetic population to do so (Gisaor, 2020). The adequate and seasonal rainfall, varied vegetation belts and the sufficient sunshine has made it possible for variety of food crops to be produced all over country, unlike the exports crops which are more regionally specialized. Staple crops such as rice, beans, maize, millet, cocoa yam, cassava, acha, wheat, plantain, yam and vegetables are all grown in Nigeria in varying quantities. Others like melon, benniseed, soya beans, palm oil, groundnut, oil, livestock products and fishery are all produced in Nigeria.

Again, agriculture remains the most important single activity in Nigeria with about 70% of the working population still engaged in it (CBN, 2019). The sector acts as the catalyst for structural transformation and economic diversification. It enables a country to fully utilize its factor endowment by depending less on foreign supply of food and raw materials for its economic growth, development and sustainability (Hemenga,

2019). Recent statistical evidence from the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) in 2014 suggest that agricultural percentage share to GDP in Nigeria in 1970 stood at 49.9%; this dropped to 31.52% in 1990 and rose to 36.70% in 1999, and further rose astronomically to the rate of 43.89% in 2002 and since then has continue to trail between 42.01% in 2007 and 40.845% in 2014 and 43% in 2018 (CBN, 2019), confirming agriculture as the dominant economic activity in Nigeria.

It is believed that the need for sustainable food production in Nigerian necessitated the successive governments to embark on a number of policies aimed at enhancing effective and efficient yield of agricultural output. The different programmes were put in place by various governments solely with the aim of improving the sector's performance to ensure maximum output of food and industrial raw materials. Between 1995 and 1999 for instance, the government embarked upon the reformation of lending policies of the Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme (ACGS) for access to funds for agricultural use. From 2000 to 2020, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), the Seven Point Agenda, and the Anchor Borrowers Scheme all recognized the importance of finance for agricultural activities. Thus, through these laudable policies, it was believed that farmers would acquire the much needed capital for improved food production.

Despite these laudable programmes and policies, statistics available shows that food prices have gone beyond the reach of many Nigerians. This situation has been worsened by the current global food crisis. Report from the Federal Ministry of Agriculture recently showed that about 65% of Nigerians are food insecure (Andohol and Gisaor, 2018). This is because a substantial number of Nigerian people earn below the one-dollar benchmark stipulated in the hunger index of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). There is thus the urgent need to investigate the palpable obstacles militating against agricultural production in Nigeria if food security, poverty reduction, rural development, health care and nutrition in the country are not to be compromised.

While 88% of the non-oil export income is generated from the agricultural sector, the total expenditure allocated to this sector since independence has been as meagre as 4% (CBN, 2019). The Nigerian government agricultural sector budget year in year out stood at ₦6 billion in 1970, ₦7 billion in 1980 and ₦8 billion in 1990. The figure stood at ₦16 billion in 2000, ₦37 billion in 2010, and ₦36 billion in 2018. However, Nigeria is said to have spent a whooping amount of ₦2,574,06 trillion from 2000 to 2018 on import of food which is worrisome as reported by National Bureau of Statistics (2019). It therefore portends worry as to how an agrarian

economy like Nigeria will not be self sufficient in food production. Inadequate funding of agricultural sector is listed out as a barrier to increased agricultural output. Even though government expenditure on agriculture is evidently said to be growing over the years yet sectoral performance has been inadequate.

To further worsen the Nigerian situation is the increasing population, growing at the rate of 3.35% (National Population Commission, 2019) while food supply is already in crisis resulting into massive food importation. This shows that the place of the agricultural sector in the mind of the government is secondary affair to oil sector being the primary affair. More so, it is evident to see from economic literature that government policies and programmes on agriculture are all exclusive and investment unfriendly for private participation within or from foreign investors hence this forestalls foreign investment into agricultural sector which is very low when compared to their participation into the oil sector (Hemenga, 2019).

Thus, the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc in all economies of the world which has resulted into worsening food supply and other economic consequences. While there are emerging evidences to buttress that developed economies such as China, US, Japan and Russia are quick to react by putting up measures and targets to mitigate the effect on the economy and people, most developing countries are still battling with the basic health infrastructure that would improve testing and quarantine. As an illustration, while China has rolled up 9 million employment creation scheme through agricultural production, US has already created 2 million jobs and Japan has provided enough financial incentives to boost food production and SMEs, the engine of growth and employment creation for their economy. It is therefore evident from the foregoing that the bulk of reaction and policy response reside with underdeveloped countries like Nigeria that are basically surviving on loans to share as palliatives.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria requires a genuine intervention in agricultural production activities that is beyond mere policy prescription but massive implementation of policy reforms for sustainable food production to avert the looming food insecurity and poverty consequent upon the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. In the absence of approved vaccine, Nigeria needs to forge ahead with economic activities amidst the pandemic to avert the looming unbearable consequences of hunger and poverty. On that note, the following policy recommendations are promulgated for implementation. They include:

- (i) Farmers in Nigeria should be granted immediate exemption from the COVID-19 lockdown and should as well be provided with the necessary hybrid inputs like fertilizers for improved planting season and harvest.
- (ii) On-going government policies on food production such as the Anchor Borrowers Programmes should be seriously conducted and monitored across the nation. At the moment, there evidence of funds and inputs diversions among the farmers and officials of government.
- (iii) This is in addition to looking into internal insecurity caused mainly Boko haram and Fulani insurgents. These crises have displaced so many farmers across the main farming zones in Nigeria.
- (iv) The ability of any nation to effectively address food insecurity for growth and development depends a great deal on the effectiveness of that nation's system of innovation. This means that key actors and stakeholders in different universities and public research institutes, as well as Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) and the private sector must work together in synergy to come up with priority areas of research and development activities and proffers solutions through the conduct of inter-disciplinary research in the areas of climate change and food security.
- (v) There is need for an increased budgetary allocation to agricultural sector. Improved food production requires increased production activities and only additional finances can sustain increased production.

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To cite this article:

GISAOR, Vincent Iorja (2021). COVID-19 and the Looming Food Insecurity and Poverty: The Need for Sustainable Food Production in Nigeria. *Journal of Development Economics and Finance*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 51-65