
**THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD SECURITY IN KENYA:
PROFIT VS NATIONAL NEED**

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Kenya.

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Kenya is a primary agricultural producer in a climatic zone that supports plant and animal life all year round, yet a third of its population perennially suffers from acute food insecurity. The right to food has a constitutional guarantee, and numerous food security strategies have been articulated by successive administrations since independence, but the food situation remains defined more by crises and private profits than by security for the people. This article analyzes the multidimensional concept of food security, the state of food security in Kenya and its challenges and trends. A few cases that relate to food production, distribution, trade and consumption are used to illustrate how politics of patronage dictate public policies that govern the food value chain. The central argument is that elite networks in Kenya's patrimonial state hold the food security agenda hostage as a source for political patronage, rent extraction and private profits at the expense of smallholder farmers, consumers and the potential for local agriculture's contribution to economic development. The combination of inconsistent policies, corruption and cartels, deliberate undermining of devolved governance and subordination of indigenous production systems to the globalist corporate interests combine to undermine Kenya's food security. In conclusion, the article argues for a system-wide approach to food security, anchored on agricultural sovereignty as a national philosophy for sustainability. It urges radical reforms in the governance system to free policy processes from elite capture, shift the population's understanding of political interests from the ethno-regional dimensions to class interests and to drop the national obsession with out-of-Africa markets as Kenya's primary trade partners in favour of regional and continental integration for synergies as prerequisites for agricultural sovereignty and food security. Using an integrated literature review and analysis, this study reviewed selected journals, relevant

media articles, and other seminal works on agricultural production and the political economy of food security in Kenya and elsewhere, providing a greater understanding of the global forces with local connections that define food system policies in Kenya.

KEYWORDS: Food Security, Agricultural Sovereignty, Governance, Seed Systems, Public Policy.

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to contribute to discourses on food security for African countries that remain under the economic noose of the Euro-American pact of domination over production systems. It provides a broad perspective on food security as a multidimensional political question rather than a simple issue of science and economics.

Security is readily associated with protection, assurance, and freedom from or ability to effectively mitigate danger or risk. To be food secure therefore can be understood in relation assured and protected access to a certain minimum standard of food and being free from the risk of losing that vital access. The most commonly cited definition of food security is from the 1996 World Food Summit: “Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 1996). The Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN (2006) breaks down this definition into four factors that are critical to one’s food security.

These are: *availability* of sufficient quantities and quality of food; *access* by individuals to adequate resources for acquiring appropriate foods; *utilization* of food through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being; and *stability* in one’s environment to allow for access to adequate food at all times. For food security objectives to be realized, all four dimensions must be fulfilled simultaneously (*ibid*).

According to Lang and Barling (2012), the notion of food security has two overarching perspectives. One perspective is on raising food production as the core answer to underconsumption and hunger, while the other is the perspective with more social and ecological dimensions that highlights the need to address a complex array of problems beyond food production. The first perspective is primarily agricultural-focused, while the latter is a food systems approach. The global governance system has almost given the production-oriented approach priority for more than a millenium, yet food insecurity still

torments a vast majority of the earth's population in societies classified as poor or rich. The food systems perspective underscores the fact that the mere availability of food is not sufficient for ensuring universal household and individual access to food.

Sustained discourse on food security led to the emergence of another dimension of "food sovereignty," with emphasis on the need for people to have control over their own food systems. A global lobby on food sovereignty emerged within a global agrarian crisis triggered by the dumping of foodstuffs in non-industrialized countries by industrialized countries, leading to the inflating of prices of staple foods and agri-inputs and thus deepening the process of dispossession (McMichael, 2015). Emphasis on sovereignty arises from the fact that food security is not just a scientific food production problem but an inherently political problem at the core of the struggle for human survival and liberty. Emphasis on this political dimension has given rise to food sovereignty as a counter-hegemonic discourse that questions the organization of the current global food system, and calls for its transformation. Food sovereignty is defined as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (Pimbert, 2022). First articulated by La Via Campesina at the 1996 World Food Summit, the concept of food sovereignty emerged as a direct challenge to corporate-controlled food systems (*ibid*), and emphasizes principles of rights and social justice over the profit-driven economics and technology of food production and distribution (Hopma & Woods, 2014).

The concepts of food systems and food sovereignty as credible approaches to securing a peoples' access to food are especially vindicated in how the circulation of food is hampered by the global financial system that prioritizes private commercial production and profits above smallholder producer and consumer rights and shared resources that support access to food. The struggle for food sovereignty has therefore taken a shift towards the politics of human rights. This includes in particular the need to develop a discursive politics to reframe what is at stake, namely the protection and support of a production model based on social cooperation, multi-functionality and ecologically restorative principles (McMichael, 2015).

The conceptual and contextual complexity of food security is underscored by its varied dimensions, including political and social stability, economic development, public health, public safety. Indeed, the physical, emotional, psychological and mental health consequences of food deprivation cannot be gainsaid, and a poorly nourished population cannot focus or

deliver on economic production. The massive food riots and protests of the 2007-2008 global food crisis, triggered by high food prices, threatened governments as well as social stability across the globe, underscoring the centrality of food in human civilizations (UN, 2011).

Food Security in Kenya

The Constitution of the Republic of Kenya (2010) provides for the right to food security as a fundamental Constitutional right. Article 43(1)(c) of the Constitution provides for the right of every person to be free from hunger, and to have adequate food of acceptable quality, while Article 43(1)(d) provides for the right to clean and safe water in adequate quantities. Access to food is a critical determinant of Kenya's rural and urban poverty indices. Food security is therefore rated highly on the scale of Kenya's national priority goals. Despite having a large population involved in the agricultural sector, Kenya is far from attaining food security. About 19.5 million individuals in Kenya are reported as starving, hungry, and/or malnourished, and in need of relief food (Omondi, 2023). With a population estimated at 50 million, 25% of the people live in underdeveloped housing and suffer a lot from food insecurity and diseases (Njora & Yilmaz 2021).

Agriculture is the primary source of food in Kenya. The country however is increasingly dependent on food imports to fill a perennial national deficit in the various categories of staple foods. Writing in one of the national newspapers, the *Daily Nation*, correspondent Constant Munda (2024) pointed out that Kenya's annual spending on food imports exceeded expenditure on machinery by a staggering 61 Billion Kenya shillings, dramatizing how Kenya is still grappling with the basics of feeding its population before it pays significant attention to industrialization. The primary food imports into Kenya are maize, wheat, and rice, along with sugar, vegetable oils, and milk. In its forecasts on food imports in Kenya, ReportLinker (2023), a market intelligence platform that provides businesses with access to databases of market research reports and industry statistics, reported that in 2023 Kenya's food imports stood at 16.40% of all goods imports and forecasted this to rise to 17.29% by 2028. There was some relief on the food situation, however, by the last quarter of 2025, when various authoritative national news outlets reported that imports of staple foods had dipped by 22% due to improved local outputs across major producing regions, largely attributed to the government's national fertilizer subsidy programme and favourable weather (Owoko, 2025). Although the government's subsidised fertiliser initiative continues to be viewed positively, the Central Bank of Kenya (2024) holds that it is yet too early to assess its impact.

The folly of Kenya relying on market-vulnerable food imports has been overly exposed by the war between Ukraine and Russia, which has interrupted the production and exportation of wheat, maize, and sunflower seeds from the two leading global grain basket countries. The demand for these products has resulted in predatory and scarcity-driven price increases. The war has also shifted the focus of humanitarian and development actors from drought-afflicted countries in the Horn of Africa region to Ukraine, reducing funding available for Kenya's humanitarian food aid (Omondi, 2023).

The politics of food for profits amidst a hungry population

Nearly 56% of the Kenyan population experiences food insecurity at some point during the year, with about 2 million of these hungry people relying on relief food donations due to persistent food shortages. During droughts, this number increases to at least 5 million, affecting both rural (53%) and urban (49%) populations. As a result of high levels of poverty, a majority of the population in Kenya has low purchasing power and is not able to obtain food, even though it is within their reach (Sadauskaite, 2014).

Maize receives the highest attention given to food products in Kenya. It was promoted by British colonial institutions which preferred it to the traditional staples of sorghum and finger millet because it reduced the amount of labor necessary to invest in producing grain (Biehl, 2021). Most of the households in the country grow maize as the main staple food and maize forms the diet of over 85% of the population (Kariuki et al., 2020). In their official policy brief research, Mutiso and Kimtai (2022) note that maize is the most consumed cereal in Kenya and is synonymous with food and nutrition security. Adequate supply of maize is not only an indication of food security but also a source of employment and household income (Kariuki et al., 2018). Maize plays a critical role in the food security of both urban and rural populations, and low yields can lead to severe food shortages and famine (Ondiek, et al., 2024). The weight of maize in the computation of food inflation is the highest proportion attributable to a single food commodity (Nzuma, 2014). It accounts for more than 20% of total agricultural production and 25% of agricultural employment in Kenya (Mohajan, 2014, in Kariuki et al., 2018). However, maize outputs levels have fluctuated over the years, with production below consumption in most years. (FAOSTAT, 2015, in Kariuki et al., 2018).

About 70% of Kenya's rural population draws its incomes from agriculture, and maize contributes about 30% of total production (Mutiso & Kimtai, 2022). According to Njeru

(2019) maize is the cheapest source of calories among the cereal grains, making up about 65% of total food calories consumed by households in Kenya. The gap between demand and domestic production has placed maize at the centre of Kenya's food security politics (*ibid*). The politics of food security in Kenya however have to be considered beyond production, distribution, trade, and consumption of maize. Kenya is classified as a lower-middle-income country and has the largest economy in East Africa (Ondieki et al., 2024) but Kenya's brand of politics creates and sustains the paradox of its immediate neighbours enjoying lower food poverty rates.

The politics of agricultural policy

As noted by Alila and Atieno (2006) agriculture is the single most important sector of the Kenyan economy. (FAO, 2024), Agriculture contributes between 20% and 33% of Kenya's GDP (FAO, 2024; GoK, 2024) and another 27% of GDP indirectly through linkages with other sectors. The sector employs more than 40% of the total population and more than 70% of the rural population (*ibid*). Given that Kenya depends solely on rainfed agriculture, extreme events caused by climate variability disrupt rainfall seasons and patterns, rendering the country vulnerable to climate-induced food insecurity (Ondiek, et al., 2024). Kenya's corrupt political and public policy system also triggers extreme events that render Kenyans vulnerable to politics-induced food insecurity.

Kenya's agricultural policies include government decisions and presidential directives that influence whole value chains, including the levels and stability of input and output prices, public investments affecting agricultural production, processing, marketing, costs and revenues, and allocation of resources (Alila & Atieno 2006). Of all agricultural products, maize receives the most attention. Shortfalls in its production often cause crisis-level concerns. Persistent shortfalls have been attributed to inadequate rainfall, low use of fertilizers, inadequate production financing, lack of extension support services, and poor uptake of new knowledge and modern technologies. Government policies however play a more pivotal role in preventing or occasioning supply shortfalls. Kenya's overdependence on agriculture should ideally press home the need for enhancing policies that support a production system with adaptable methods that guarantee food sustainability and economic development beyond the bounds of agriculture. Public policies on agriculture and food production are instead influenced by the diverse private interests of Kenya's political elite, whose members are in constant competition to exercise self-serving leverage in public policy

processes. These interests are based on geographical climate regions that determine agricultural commodity produce and marketing, and also coincide with ethnic origins (Alila & Atieno, 2006). The political elite acts in alliance with the economic elite. These alliances often have long histories, but Kenyan politics is defined by constant realignments based on interests and expediency. The consequence is continuity rather than significant change in Kenya's unpredictable agricultural policy (*ibid*).

Using cases of post-independence African states to illustrate political meddling in agriculture, Bates (2005) discusses how policy on agriculture is derivative. It is devised to cope with political problems whose immediate origins lie outside of the agriculture sector. Kenya's patrimonial state, for example, profoundly influences agriculture policy through the partisan exercise of presidential powers, the linkage between ethnicity and agricultural production systems, the quest for rent extraction and patronage by favored groups and individuals, the disregard of evidence-based policy formulation, and expectation of access to donor funding (Smith et al., 2004). All these are political factors that are manipulated in favour of sustaining the political and economic domination of the small group of elite that has overwhelming control over the Kenyan state and its politics, at the expense of development in the agriculture value chain.

The politics of seeds

The seed industry in Kenya pits smallholder farmers against multinational seed corporations, and political and commercial power brokers. Hybrid maize, for example, requires new seeds for every crop to maintain its potential and has proved a particularly viable and attractive business model for the seed industry (Morris, 1998 in Erenstein et al., 2022). In their seminal work on the effect of corporate power in the battle for food sovereignty in Africa, Kamau et al. (2025) authoritatively elucidate how multinational agrochemical corporations, supported by international "development" agencies, "nonprofit" foundations, and compliant governments – a league in which the political regime in Kenya is always a star player – are systematically restructuring African agricultural systems in the name of promoting food security when their true agenda is to enclose the agricultural commons, commodify seed systems, and establish corporate dependencies that extract wealth from the world's poorest farmers. Following in this pattern, the dominance of multinational seed companies has significantly impacted farmers in Kenya, narrowing their choices, increasing seed prices, and reducing access to traditional and farmer-managed seeds (Smith, 2018). This presents

opportunities that Kenya's patrimonial state's patronage system exploits to profit the political and economic elite as pliant smallholders bear the ultimate burden as a ready market for government-certified seeds.

African seed systems have historically been based on indigenous values of sharing, reciprocity, and balance with nature (Swiderska & Argumedo, 2022). In direct confrontation with this African approach, the move towards contemporary seed consolidation began with colonial processes that reduced smallholder land availability, increased migration, reduced time available for farming, and coerced production of particular "cash" crops while promoting a scientific bias against local varieties of seeds appropriate for smallholder farmer conditions (Kerr, 2013 in Kamau et al., 2025). The right to seeds, which includes the right to own, preserve, use, exchange and sell farmer-bred seeds and propagating materials, and the right to protect traditional knowledge on seed varieties is foundational for agricultural sovereignty and food security. However, the preservation of this right continues to face challenges in the face of globalization, global commercial interests, and evolving intellectual property regimes (Munyiri, 2024). Indigenous smallholder farmers are however mobilizing, organizing and pushing back. In a recent (2025) decision that was hailed as a landmark strike in favour of food sovereignty, the High Court of Kenya ruled that farmers have the right to save and share their indigenous seeds. The decision arose from a legal challenge by farmers and rights advocacy groups against a punitive law that disallowed traditional seed saving, sharing and exchange (Karungichi, 2025). The corporate interests are also mobilizing, organizing and pushing back as seen in the immediate announcement by the government of Kenya that it would appeal that High Court decision that was celebrated by Kenyan farmers.

In their seminal work, Kamau et al. (2025) conclude that evidence of their study overwhelmingly demonstrates that the increasing trend to control seed supply in Africa represents not genuine concern for food security but rather a sophisticated mechanism of corporate control disguised as food security and philanthropy, whose ultimate goal is to achieve pliant and dependant African agricultural systems for profit extraction through seed patents, genetic modification technologies, and chemical input dependencies.

The politics of trade

Smith et al. (2004) identify trade policy as an important subset in the political economy of maize, especially concerning price determination. Owing to its strategic importance, the maize market is on one hand characterized by relatively high government interventions,

officially to promote maize productivity but also to control the availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability of maize and maize products, including the inputs market for the maize value chain (Were, 2021). Market failures in the maize trade in Kenya are a constant feature, exemplified by the poor distribution between deficit and surplus regions. The market has never been able to signal or provide incentives for traders to address supply issues (Njeru, 2019). These are politics and policy-induced failures that provide perfect opportunities for interventions by policy entrepreneurs to “correct market failures.”

Maize marketing and trade policy in Kenya has been dominated by the challenges of how to keep farm prices high enough to incentivize production while at the same time keeping them low enough to ensure consumer access to food, and how to effectively deal with food price instability (Ariga & Jayne, 2010). Since 1988 at the advent of liberalization of the maize subsector, a private market channel has operated legally side by side with the state-owned National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB). In the private channel, prices are set by supply and demand forces while the NCPB purchases and sells maize at administratively determined prices (Jayne et al. 2008). The government normally imposes variable tariffs on maize imports to stem the inflow of cheap imported maize but occasionally grants permits for the importation of duty-free maize to meet what are alleged to be local supply shortfalls, which happen to be very frequent. The import debate always takes a political tone with politicians from maize-producing regions totally against any imports for the fear that importing would likely depress producer prices in the middle of the main harvest season, as farmers usually sell immediately thereafter (Njeru, 2019). With the majority of rural farm households in Kenya being poorer smallholders who are net buyers of maize, and the large-scale farmers (roughly 20% of farms) accounting for the majority of the maize marketed nationwide, the price-setting operations tend to transfer income from (mostly poorer) maize-purchasing rural households and urban consumers to larger maize-selling farms (Smith et al., 2004) and brokers. In their analysis of the impact of agricultural policies on food security in Kenya, Njora and Yilmaz (2021) note how the NCPB seems to benefit large scale farmers as compared to the benefits small scale farmers gain. They point out how it is very challenging for small-scale farmers to sell their produce to the Board and to obtain subsidized fertilizers. Large scale farmers find it very easy to access all services provided by NCPB without much struggle. These are examples of how Kenya's governance is characterized by an intricate dovetailing of economic and political power, which is sharply manifest in the food and agriculture sector. The origins of state marketing agencies like the NCPB lie in the colonial

period with the rationale being control and extraction. Because agriculture represents the principal economic activity across most of Africa, the agencies that controlled the market for agricultural produce soon became the wealthiest and economically most significant single units (Bates, 2005). A post-colonial elite inherited the colonial practice of subsidizing large-scale farmers, while privilege quickly congealed into entitlement, secured by political clout (Musembi & Scott-Villiers, 2017).

Kenya's patronage system is the poorer cousin on the global stage. Lower international market prices are not necessarily a positive indicator for Kenya's maize subsector. The global maize market has a more vicious patronage system that is backed by powerful states as manifested in form of agricultural subsidies. Rich countries provide billions of dollars and euros in subsidies to their richest farmers and producers, pitting smallholder farmers in developing countries against the might of the USA and European governments (Stuart, 2005). By excessively and unilaterally protecting their farmers from the risks of agricultural production, the USA and European Union policies reduce the incentives for the world to cope with country-specific risks through a fair, efficient, and undistorted trade regime (Bureau et al., 2013). Both domestic (farm) and export (trade) subsidies distort trade flows of agricultural goods from exporting countries to importing countries (Koo & Kennedy, 2006). They depress global prices, hurting smallholder farmers. They also undermine rural livelihoods and food security through unfair competition in local markets, and developing countries lose market share when exporting to other markets as they cannot compete with the prices of dumped maize (Stuart, 2005). These subsidies undermine regional maize trade within the East African Community and make Kenyans to dependent on imports that hurt agricultural food production systems, making Kenya more dependent on the exploitative foreign grain markets of Europe and North America.

Trade liberalization agreements and financial ties with international financial institutions have created exploitative relations that restrict Kenya from developing food security policies that are responsive to the development needs of the country (Sadauskaite, 2014). Due to the extensive inflows of food imports and ever available foreign food aid, local farmers are disadvantaged compared to foreign food producers, and this depresses domestic food production. Food crops like maize that could be grown in Kenya are imported from the US, benefiting large scale rich American farmers who produce under subsidies while destroying the market for local smallholder farmers who would supply these aid programmes. While

Kenya's current fertilizer subsidy policy has potential to improve yields in the short term, it is unsustainable. Kenya cannot afford to support its maize producers, especially the majority smallholders, at the levels of rich countries, and thus subsidies remain a rigged policy that distorts trade and production in favour of large-scale producers.

The politics of genetic modification of food crops

The science of genetically modified organisms (GMO) has provided scaffolding for elite extraction from Kenya's food security scene, particularly the maize subsector. Since the mid-1990s, there has been increased use of maize seed with biotechnological traits (e.g. insect resistance and herbicide tolerance) to both increase maize yield potential and reduce yield loss to pest and environmental stress (Cabrera-Ponce et al., 2019 in Erenstein et al., 2022). Maize is now the second most widely grown genetically modified crop globally (Erenstein et al., 2022). In October 2022, the Cabinet of the government of Kenya lifted a decade long ban on the cultivation within Kenya and importation of genetically modified crops and animal feed. This sudden change in policy was neither preceded by public education and debate on genetically modified products nor the promotion of public debate thereafter. Those with capacity to take immediate advantage of such sudden change of policy were bulk importers of maize who mostly deal in food for profit and not for human sustenance and survival. Instead of promoting informed public discourse on the benefits and risks of genetically modified maize, the political and economic elite in Kenya use it in political games to discredit each other's position on food security and paint theirs in a positive light. Smallholder farmers and consumers are left too confused to know the truth and too misinformed to effectively question maize solutions offered by public authorities.

The politics of the policy delivery system: governance

The biggest dimension of the politics of food security in Kenya, which underlies and overrides the facets discussed above is the endemic failure of the policy delivery architecture, that is Kenya's political and governance system.

In their analysis of the history of Kenya's political economy, Wafula and Odula (2018) list some of the pertinent issues in governance that adversely affect food security in Kenya as including inequality in land tenure, corruption, centralization of power and weak/inappropriate institutions due to government capture by the political elite. In Kenya's patrimonial governance system, public policies are designed to fail for as long as the failure feeds the patrons and selected clients of the system. As Njeru (2019) argues, one of the

consequences is contested official data – credible evidence for policy – with different stakeholders providing different numbers that support their arguments. The Ministry of Agriculture has a mandate to generate data for policy decisions, but it huffs and puffs as it waits for directives from the presidency or some well-oiled commercial bidder. [Tegemeo Institute](#) is recognized as a credible source of data in agriculture but the Ministry decides if and when to use the data. As Njeru (2019) aptly notes, the interests among the political and economic elite that stir maize policy debates do not care about policy evidence. A similar observation is made by Mwangi (2020) on how in severe corruption cases even effectively designed policies can fail due to negligent or non-existent implementation. Food production, pricing, marketing, and distribution often fall victim to regulatory power games as the beneficiary elite exert control to shore up their economic and political fortunes. A field investigation by Biehl, K. (2021) for example, revealed how smallholder farmers in Eastern Kenya are left by the state to deal with aflatoxin, a problem of toxicity that is beyond their capability to detect. Through its failure to establish a system of testing and regulation that reaches rural villages and informal markets, the state actively produces unprotection (Tousignant 2018, in Biehl, 2021) and continues to pay lip service to food security.

Musembi and Scott-Villiers (2017) recount a 2008 Kenyan government announcement that NCPB would import maize using aid from Japan and sell it to millers cheaply for them to sell maize flour on the local retail market at low prices. The consumer price of flour remained stubbornly high. At least half of the maize allocations of the scheme's first phase went to only 10 companies and a quarter was issued to brokers, who sold on to the millers at a mark-up (Fengler & Kiringai 2010, in Musembi & Scott-Villiers, 2017). In February 2009, the scheme was abandoned. Public losses were estimated at Ksh.23.4 billion and the scheme joined the lexicon of Kenya's maize scams.

A sampling of local media coverage perhaps best summarizes the depth and breadth of corruption in Kenya's maize subsector. Writing in the Sunday Nation Newspaper (2022) under the headline "*How maize scandals have been part of Kenyan politics since the 1960s*", renowned investigative journalist John Kamau recalls how the government-sanctioned importation of GM maize, supposedly to lower the cost of flour, yet farmers in the country's breadbasket regions were at the time thick in the harvesting season. "Trade Cabinet Secretary Moses Kuria and his Agriculture colleague Mithika Linturi are moving at the right speed towards a maize scandal. It will not be long before they reach the gates of Apaté, the goddess

of fraud and deception in Greek mythology, ...no government since 1963 has escaped a maize scandal”, wrote John Kamau. “*New maize scandal as Ruto is grilled*” was the headline of choice that the same Nation Newspaper (2009) gave to a story on a scandal-ridden consignment of imported maize in which the current President of Kenya allegedly played a key role as Minister for Agriculture. In The Standard Newspaper (2020), a story by Kamau Muthoni and Allan Mungai was given the headline “*From Ngei to Waluke: Maize is Kenya’s oldest bag of scandals.*” A more recent scandal of substandard fertilizer under a state subsidy programme at the peak of a maize planting season was headlined “*Kenya fertilizer scandal newest threat to Ruto’s food agenda*” by the regional weekly, the East African (2024).

The first Commission of Inquiry “*to inquire into the present maize position in Kenya*” was appointed by President Jomo Kenyatta in 1965, barely a year into independence. Six decades later, Kenya is still episodically inquiring into the maize situation and still not finding a solution. For Kenya to resolve its food insecurity crisis, the focus must shift from blaming farmers, nature, rain, technology, and the maize itself to fixing the political and governance system.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As discussed above, the government of Kenya routinely undermines efforts towards the development of indigenous capacity for agriculture and related food systems. The combination of inconsistent policies, private interest-driven policy decisions, political patronage-serving interventions in the food value chain, corruption and cartels in the food value chain, deliberate undermining of devolved governance and subordination of indigenous food systems interests to the globalist Euro-American corporate interests combine to undermine the achievement of Kenya’s food and nutrition security.

Kenya struggles with perennial challenges in increasing food production and reducing reliance on imports. The interplay among economic factors, political patronage and policy interventions will continue to shape future trends in the food situation in Kenya. Although the tendency has been to blame the slow adoption of science and technologies in the production of food on the farm as the cause of shortfalls, the science, the farmers, and the land are innocent. It is the broken politics and governance that need fixing. As Smale et al. (2013) note, the experience of maize technical change (adoption) in Sub-Saharan Africa underscores

the role of policy as a determinant of development, adoption, and impact, and therefore it is not purely a matter of science and nature. Abate et al. (2015) also spotlight policy as the place to focus by proposing investment in agricultural research and development, and policy support for continued growth of agriculture. Our politics and public policy must embrace and support smallholders and the development of indigenous technologies. The experience of Ethiopia's policymakers on maize has demonstrated that productivity change is achievable: indigenous innovation and investment in agriculture are paying dividends (Abate et al., 2015). For Kenya's agriculture sector to develop and indigenous food systems to thrive, Kenyans must reject welfare colonialism that comes in the form of food aid and foreign funding for food production systems, which provide opportunities for governing and control from a distance.

Overreliance on a few staples, especially maize, wheat, and rice, the bulk of which are imported almost always with private profit and rent extraction as the biggest motivations, leaves Kenya exposed and too vulnerable to factors beyond its control. These extrenous factors determine quality, availability, and the cost of food. There is a need for diversification to indigenous food crops that have always suited Kenya's climatic and soil conditions, and local knowledge. This diversification has to be designed as a national policy priority, deliberate, and widespread through public education programmes at national and county levels. Promoting crop diversity and sensitizing the populace on the importance will reduce the reliance people have on maize. As Njora and Yilmaz (2021) argue, promotion of crop diversity and sensitizing the populace on the importance will reduce overreliance on maize. Deliberate revival of indigenous crops synchronizes well with the food systems and agricultural sovereignty approach to food and nutrition security. It will return control over food systems, including seed ownership, to the majority of Kenya's farmers, who are the smallholders spread around the country. Sustainable food security requires reclaiming seed sovereignty through biocultural rights-based approaches, supporting farmer-led innovation, and resisting the corporate enclosure of agricultural commons. The way to Kenya's food and nutrition security is fraught with the risk of irreparable failure unless we prioritize farmer autonomy, indigenous knowledge systems, and biocultural rights-based approaches to seed governance. Policymakers must actively engage indigenous peoples and their local organizations in defining seed policies and laws, ensuring these recognize and reinforce existing customary laws that preserve genetic diversity and ensure seed access. Support for farmer-managed seed systems, community seed banks based on indigenous knowledge and

rules, and indigenous plant breeding systems that have existed for millennia must replace the current crusade toward corporate monopolization (Kamau et al., 2025).

Whereas Kenya's sporadic public policy on food security has tended to singularly focus on increasing yields for specific mono crops, especially maize, or otherwise importing "to cater for deficits," post harvest food losses and wastage, as well as the lack of relevant technological and infrastructural facilities and synergies that ensure that foods are available to those in need in periods and regions of plenty and scarcity (Ridolfi et al., 2018) are key factors that contribute to food insecurity in Kenya. Singular focus on increasing crop yields is not a panacea to Kenya's perennial food crisis. Focusing on any single feature of a market economy without considering the intertwined dynamics of an economic system will eventually result in diminishing returns as more land is brought under a mono-crop with little consideration to system-wide synergistic value addition. As Abate et al. (2015) note in Ethiopia's experience, a hard lesson was learned at early stages about the importance of market development and commercialization when maize prices collapsed in 2001/02 following a bumper harvest the previous year.

Widely available evidence confirms very limited exploitation of the potential in the regional economic communities of the East African Community and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) that Kenya is part of. There is, instead, a fatal obsession with European, North American and West Asian markets as if the feeling of being validated by these regions adds value to Kenya's development. It does not. Kenya needs to prioritize the Eastern and Southern Africa region as a connected economic system in which it can optimize crucial synergies, linkages, and scale for agricultural production, food sufficiency and value. As Reinert (2007) advises, our production economics must recognize the importance of increasing returns that come from knowledge and industry, technological change, and synergies – factors that acting together produce the cumulative causations or reactions that create the structural change called economic development. In this system, Kenya ought to prioritize a local manufacturing sector that will in turn create demand and supply that trigger constant upgrading in the agriculture sector and improve real purchasing power for consumers. Instead of keeping African farmers, researchers, innovators, and consumers apart in aid of the Euro-American global agenda, Kenya's national policy should prioritize regional and continental integration. Smale et al. (2013) highlight the promotion of regional trade as one of the most effective "quick-wins" for reducing food price volatility as

regional production varies less than production in individual countries, and there is scope for intra-regional trade in all but the worst years. Going into trade negotiations with external powers as a regional and/or continental bloc – instead of an individual country – will enhance Kenya’s chances of standing up against the rigged international trade system.

Building sustainable capacity for food and nutrition security in Kenya requires that we also prioritize fixing Kenya’s broken governance system to especially shift focus from food for profit to food for human sustenance and development. A progressive policy regime for food sufficiency requires a predictable, well-defined food security strategy that is implemented sequentially (Smale et al., 2013), supported by the institutionalization of a transparent and consultative public policy culture that gives county governments and citizens their space as the constitution of Kenya demands. As Article 43 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) assures citizens of the right to be free from hunger and to have adequate food of acceptable quality the national and county governments must be constantly pressured through political, policy advocacy and judicial action to direct adequate resources towards food production, value addition and distribution.

Despite agriculture being a constitutionally devolved function, the national government of Kenya has continued to hold onto it and the bulk of resources meant for agriculture (Tarus, 2019). These hoarding of devolved functions and funds impedes the contribution of county governments to the development of the integrated ecosystem for food security. County governments are best placed for providing basic infrastructure that supports the production and distribution of food, including roads, dams, wells, markets, extension and advisory services, dealing with land disputes, providing a forum for community participation in the food security agenda, and providing necessary support for environmental sustainability. They have a better understanding of the needs of smallholder farmers and local conditions that affect food systems, including security, weather patterns, crop preferences and patterns, local trade flows, and related synergies (Wafula & Odula, 2018). Kenya must prioritize completion of the devolution governance as envisaged in the Constitution, and especially finalize the unbundling and effectively handing over functions and resources that are assigned to county governments.

There is minimal public investment in the Kenyan agriculture sector and related infrastructure beyond the periodic tokenist “goodies” that are designed as a bait for political support.

Because of the strong ethno-regional dimension of Kenya's politics, there is hardly any attention paid to class-based organizing for agricultural producers, consumers and other stakeholders in the food value chain. The fact that the national and county governments openly pay minimal attention to agriculture, only investing in sporadic, disjointed and tokenist high visibility projects for political mileage hardly registers on Kenyan voters' priority list. There is need for sustained political education for Kenyan citizens, especially for voters to attach a high political price to the insensitivity of politicians, political parties and the government. Mobilization, organization, political education and advocacy action on class-basis would force improvement in national and county public policy processes in Kenya to prioritize food sovereignty and the ultimate achievement of food and nutrition security.

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