

IMPACTS OF FOOD IMPORTATIONS DEPENDENCY ON FOOD SECURITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Many types of research have been conducted regarding sustainable development in the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region. Shreds of evidence have shown that this part of the world is still behind others in many aspects of development. Indeed, a 2018-year review by the World Bank revealed that by 2030 nearly 9 of every ten living in extreme poverty would be living in sub-Saharan Africa (Year in Review: 2018 in 14 Charts, 2018). One of the aspects of sustainable development in which Sub-Saharan African countries still struggle the most is to ensure food security among its habitat. If there is a crucial impediment to the development of the region, it is plausibly food insecurity. Strikingly, the percentage of people who are food insecure makes food insecurity in these countries the corollary of extreme poverty and its cause. Thus, it has been critical for the international community and the local governments to figure out how to improve food security. The data has it that it is such a convoluted endeavor given the controllable and uncontrollable conditions that have been the primary roadblocks.

This research intended to evaluate how the prevalence in the region of food importation dependency to satisfy the food needs of the population impacts the above endeavor. It is a critical assessment since commercial food imports have been one of the conventional ways a nation can ensure its citizens are food secure. Meanwhile, can or has this pathway also pave (d) the way for Sub-Saharan African countries to enhance food security? How so, since almost 60% percent of the world's population living under 1.90\$ a day are from in this region (Global poverty: Facts, FAQs, and how to help | World Vision, n.d.). An elucidation to these and other related questions is what this study brought on the table. Indeed, the results and conclusions of this study sprung from a careful analysis of data published by regional and international organizations involved in eradicating food insecurity and undernourishment.

Needless to say, part of the gravity of the findings would be to enlighten governments' policymakers of what conditions to consider if their nation relies on commercial food imports to satisfy the citizens' food needs. It is possible that most countries in SSA still have a long way to

go to achieve food sufficiency. Additionally, in light of a health crisis like the current pandemic and many other conditions, this research analyses the shortcomings of food import dependency in the case of SSA countries, thus, shedding light on why other solutions like scaling up local food supply can be more fruitful.

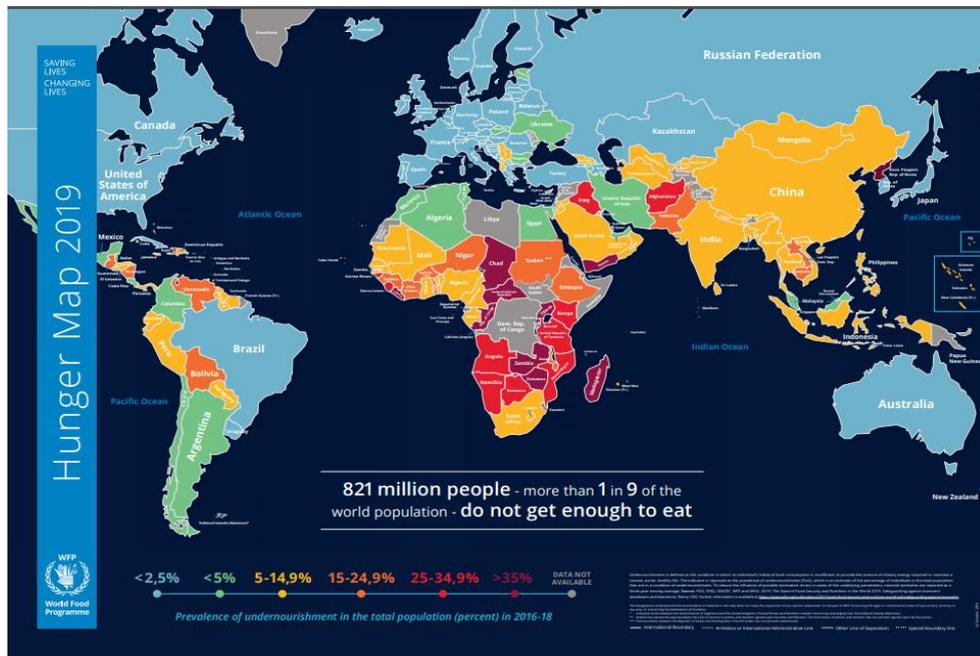
The current state of affairs

As defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, food insecurity is "a situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and active and healthy life." It has been such a convoluted term to define, but all definitions have proven that food security encompasses more dimensions than just secure access. They are food availability, stability, and utilization. Food utilization, which mainly implies the idea of being knowledgeable enough to choose, prepare, and consume foods that result in healthy nutrition. Indeed, food insecurity has never been only an issue of availability or access because studies have revealed that even in the developed world, millions of people live food insecure. They might have the means to secure access, but they are unenlightened about healthy food choices or are not encouraged to consider them.

That said, different countries or regions around the world have struggled, and still do, differently. However, a wealth of evidence shows that sub-Saharan Africa countries struggle the most in all the facets of food insecurity. They struggle to make qualitative food available for everyone to purchase. The socio-economic status of most of the population makes it hard for them to access that food even when it is available at the market. Moreover, due to the vulnerability of environmental conditions in recent years and political instability, food production has not been stable. The region also has the highest rate of education exclusion (so many people are illiterate), as UNESCO reported, which is a significant setback/challenge for the region to thrive in the food utilization dimension.

The most recent data shows that in SSA, more than 25% of the population are undernourished, which is the worst severe stage of food insecurity, compared to 16% in Asia and the Pacific. Additionally, according to the World Food Program's world hunger map in 2019, of the 821 million people who do not get enough quality food (are food insecure), more than 50% of them are from sub-Saharan Africa (World Food Program, 2019). Though the number of people who

do not have enough to eat has decreased globally, the trend is the opposite in this region, and many conditions have led to this status quo.



As of 2019, Sub-Saharan Africa was home to more than 50% of the world population that do not get enough and qualitative food to eat.

Source: World Food Program

As the numbers show, human security of more than 30% of the population in the region is threatened. Indeed, as stated by the United Nations development program, food security is one of the critical aspects of human security and can significantly affect other aspects. Even if the region might have become politically or environmentally stable, the international community still recognizes it as one of the regions with the lowest score on human security. Ensuring food security is also classified as one of the crucial sustainable development goals to transform our planet. Thus, there is a need for SSA countries to impede the worsening of the crisis, which is why several international humanitarian organizations do invest a lot in increasing secure access to nutritious food for those who suffer the most.

Causes and conditions that lead to severe food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa

Food insecurity is such a complex issue that its roots vary from region to region and from countries to countries. A country can face food insecurity due to natural conditions such as poor ecological conditions for food production that include lack of agricultural land or droughts. Food availability, as one of the dimensions of food security, is also disrupted by a lack of technical skills or enough agricultural input to adapt to environmental changes. Studies have shown that these conditions have contributed in different ways to the worsening of food insecurity in SSA. Given that the agriculture system in the region relies mostly on rainfall for water input, smallholder farmers that constitute the majority of the agriculture workforce have struggled to boost or maintain their production level due to climatic changes that affected the rain availability in some countries. For instance, in the last ten years, three-quarters of the most severe droughts have been in Africa, and the SSA region was affected. As reported by the Africa Rice Center, it has been the most significant environmental constraint for rice production in SSA (Ndjiondjop et al. 1260). Moreover, droughts have been an ideal environment for pest outbreaks, such as lethal maize necrosis. In recent years, it was a critical limiting factor of corn yields in many parts of the region

Nonetheless, food availability or food self-sufficiency is not the only substantive preconditions to ensure food security in a country/region. Indeed, many countries do rely on some imports to satisfy the need for certain food products given that their climatic zone is not appropriate for the cultivation of such products. For secure access to enough qualitative foods, individuals need to have financial means to afford the cost of food at the market. Though more than 60% of the population in SSA countries are smallholders, subsistence farmers are their primary source of income, producing less than they need for the entire civic year. Their agriculture yields often suffice the food needs for just a couple of months after the harvest season. So, they must resort to the food available on the market. Meanwhile, the World Bank reported in 2018 that, as of 2015, 41% of the population in SSA countries lived in extreme poverty, and most of them were rural farmers. It is the highest poverty rate compared to other regions, and the World Bank projected, in the same report, that in the next 30 years that SSA will be home to 9 out of 10 people living in extreme poverty (Year in Review: 2018 in 14 Charts, 2018). Therefore, poverty and lack of steady income is the single most significant root of food insecurity in this part of the

world. More than half of the population relies upon the subsistence farming system, which does not yield enough to satisfy their food needs. At the same time, they do not earn enough to access the nutritious and safe food available at the market.

Food imports as a viable solution: how did that come out?

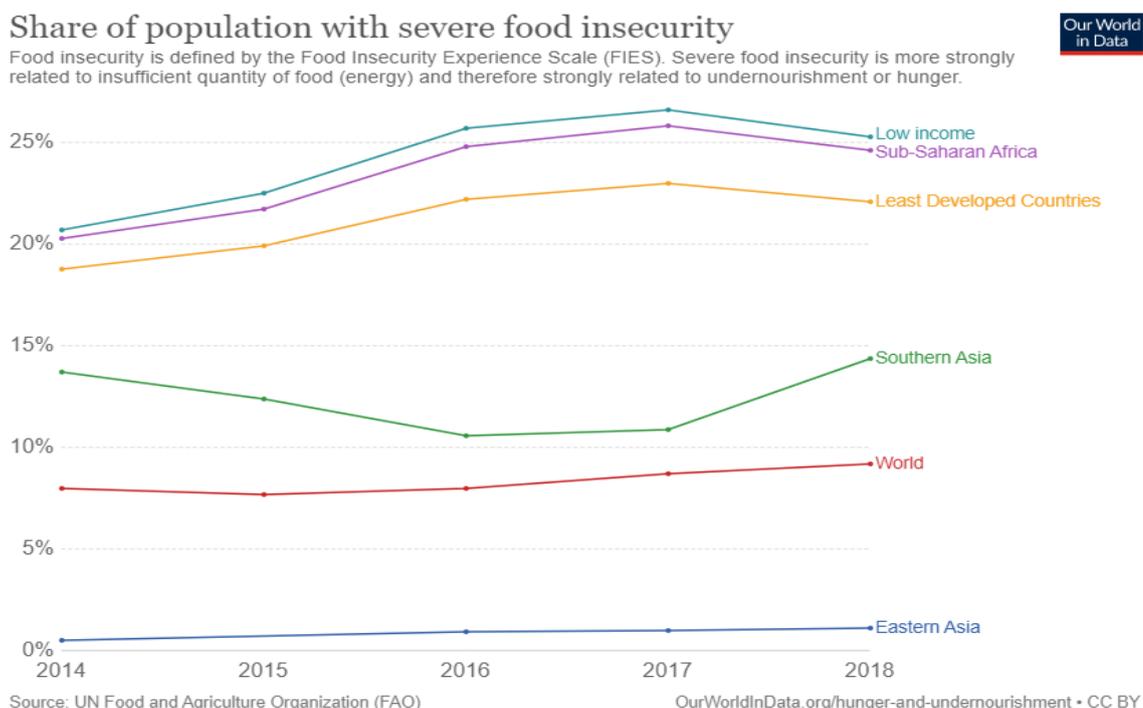
There are varied approaches to addressing food insecurity in a specific country/region, and they are relative to the roots of the issue in that area. Conventionally, three ways a country can ensure food security are domestic production, food imports, and food aid. In SSA, all three ways have been at the forefront of the local and international community agenda to achieve secure access to food for the poor rural and urban populations. Provided that the problem has many facets, there is no one-fits-all solution that can be thought of. Nevertheless, this research explored the impact of food import dependency on ensuring food security in the SSA region.

Half a century ago, the food trade deficit in SSA was at the lowest level it has ever been since then. Indeed, some countries of the region were net food exporters. The Agri-food trade data of Burundi, one of the SSA countries and one of the most food-insecure countries in the world, shows that until the 1990s, the country exported more food products than it imported (FAOSTAT, 2014). Today, the country's total annual food production would only satisfy the food needs of one person for 55-60 days per year, which implies that food imports cover more than 50% of the food consumed (Burundi | World Food Program, n.d.). The situation turned around with the prevalence of political instability, decades of civil wars, fleeing out of the country of many peasants, and economic instability. Like other countries in the same situation, the best way to go achieve food security was to resort to food imports and food aid. This approach was reasonable, given that the local food production system had been disrupted. Additionally, food imports seemed to be a viable solution for countries that faced drastic environmental changes that caused long periods of droughts, for instance, which impeded local agriculture yields.

There is no denying that food imports were critical to ensuring food security in the aftermath of political instability or dire climatic changes. Most people are smallholder farmers and are expected to satisfy most of the food needs. They practice traditional, low inputs, and rain-fed agriculture system that is less adaptive to environmental changes. Thus, in case of rain shortage or terrible

drought periods that have been common in the region, resorting food imported from other regions/parts of the world has always been a practical way out of food shortages. To this day, though political stability has improved in many SSA countries, ecological conditions are still the main roadblock to domestic food production; so, importing food is still needed to ensure food availability, hence food security.

Meanwhile, a wealth of data shows that food imports did not curb food insecurity effectively or as expected. From the time that SSA countries became net food importers, the number of people who are food insecure started increasing. To this day, the region is considered as the part of the world that is critically affected by hunger. Indeed, it was not a one-fits-all solution, but the correlation is strong that one can conclude that resorting to food imports has been a band-aid solution to the problem. Though the low yields in the domestic agriculture system could be offset by food imported outside of each country, food insecurity kept getting worse among the smallholder farmers, and urban and rural landless poor. Indeed, as of 2018, almost 25% of the region's population was affected by severe food insecurity, which is the highest per capita percent in the world.



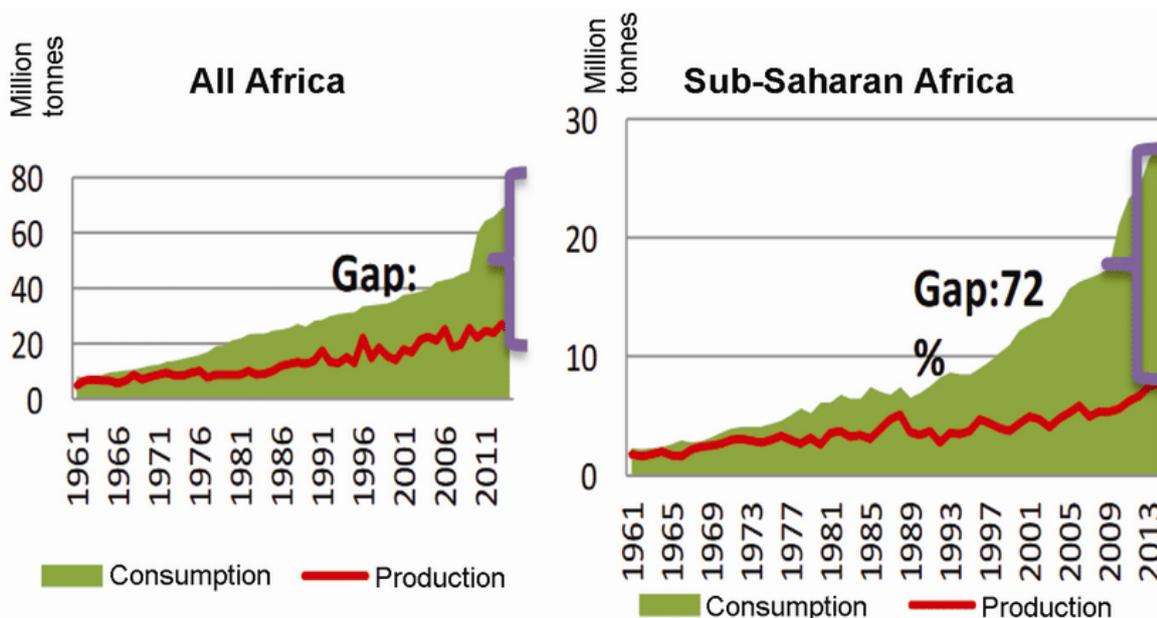
As shown on this SSA has become the region that is affected by severe food insecurity the most.

Source: Our World in Data

Why the approach did not pan out; what were/are the roadblocks

As previously mentioned, food imports have been vital to alleviating food insecurity in the aftermath of political instability and civil war that ravaged most countries in the late of 20th century and early 21st century. In effect, it was during that period that the region saw a significant increase in the food trade deficit. Each country had to rely on some type of imported food or food aid from the neighboring countries or overseas. Moreover, importing food products out of concerns of starvation remained an issue for many countries in the region due to environmental conditions that have become inappropriate for their farming systems.

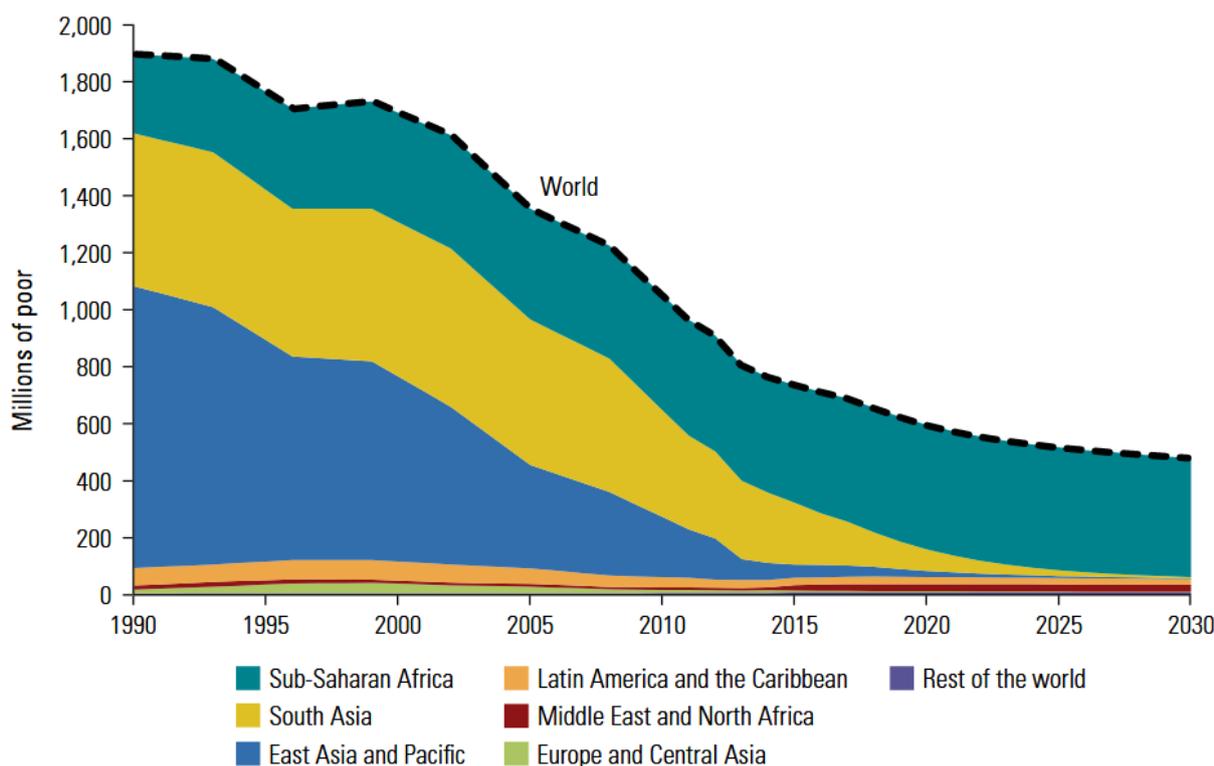
But the increase in domestic food demand due to the high growth of the population in the last thirty years is one of the aspects that impede the contribution of food imports in alleviating food insecurity. If the local agriculture system is far from satisfying the domestic food needs it would be hardly possible for SSA countries to import enough foods for the population that almost tripled since 1990.



This graph showcases how the growing discrepancy between food consumption and local food production in the last couple of decades.

Source: CGIAR Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers - Research Center on Wheat.

The population growth, thus food demand, in the region is indeed not the only roadblock to the contribution of food import dependency in ensuring food security. Instead, the fact that most of the population does not have a steady source of income makes it hard for them to access even the available food at the market. Poverty or lack of income is the principal factor causing food insecurity and, as of 2008, more than 47% of the SSA population lived on \$1.25 or less, which makes it home almost 70% of people living in extreme poverty in the world. (World Bank Sees Progress Against Extreme Poverty, But Flags Vulnerabilities, 2012). Moreover, as projected by the 2018 World Bank annual report, the percentage will have increase to 90% by the end of this decade.



Source: PovcalNet (online analysis tool), World Bank, Washington, DC, <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/>. World Development Indicators; World Economic Outlook; Global Economic Prospects; Economist Intelligence Unit.

Therefore, since imported foods are often too expensive even for the financially stable local individuals, most people SSA countries cannot access regularly due to lack of financial means/steady source of income. For many years, until today, more than 60% of the SSA

population are smallholder, subsistence farmers. They produce enough to feed their families often for a few months after the harvest seasons. As most of those farmers practice traditional farming that is sensitive to climatic changes, it is challenging for them to produce enough food that will generate financial income. Hence, regardless of the positive impact that food imports have had or can have on food availability in SSA, they can do little to mitigate food insecurity among the most vulnerable individuals.

In SSA countries where imported food products can be less expensive than domestic food and even accessible by individuals most vulnerable to food insecurity, it is critical to factor in how disruptive it can be to the local food production chain. As their market shrinks, they will not have enough means to invest in agricultural inputs or technical supports that are essential to boost their agricultural yields. Food aids, an extreme case of non-domestic food that is supposedly accessible by everyone, have, in some cases, turned out to worsen the issue more so than solving it. During the civil war of 1995-2005 in Burundi, most people were internally displaced in refugee camps, and far from their agricultural lands. Thus, the government resorted to food aid, composed mainly of maize, rice, and beans, provided by different international organizations. It significantly affected the local producers of those products who were able to continue their farming activities. So, they reduced their investment efforts to just meet the needs of the low demand, something which, as the political conflicts wound down, was at the roots of deserted local food markets since food aids were a short-term supply. The key point here is that food imports that are way cheaper than domestic food have the potential to worsen food insecurity though they might seem to be one of the viable ways-out.

Recommendations

There are many strings attached to ensuring food availability, food access, food utilization, and food stability as the four dimensions of food security. It is such a convoluted endeavor and countries/regions have taken different pathways relative to what is practical for them. Generically, countries with productive agriculture systems are the least affected by food insecurity. Food self-sufficiency is a critical precondition for food security, but it is not the only ideal condition. No

country in the world is 100% food self-sufficient, and one out of 6 people around the world rely significantly on food imports to feed themselves. Ecological, climatic conditions differ from country to country; thus, in each country, it is appropriate to choose to cultivate certain crops more than others. To satisfy the rest of the food demand, food imports are the last resort.

Meanwhile, it is necessary for every country, especially SSA countries, to be vigilant and not significantly depend on food imports out of necessity for sustenance, to prevent starvation within the population. Countries that make the top list of food importers often do so out of necessity to create more variety for the consumer, and most of their population can afford the imported food at whatever cost. For countries/regions like SSA, where most people rely upon smallholder farming as their source of income, the imports are often too expensive for them. It is cost heavily on their investment in several agriculture inputs or technical support when the farming season arrives. Therefore, there is a need to scale up local food production to ensure food availability and access for most the population.

Some aspects of how to improve the agriculture system ins SSA countries as in a way to effectively achieve food security include the development of irrigated agriculture in regions that can support the system in a sustainable manner. The rain-fed farming system that most people practice has not been that yielding in recent years due to climate change. Thence, countries should much investment in irrigated agriculture, and encourage farmers to not consider the rain season as the only period during which they can farm. There's evidence of SSA countries that have started the campaign, with the help international organizations. But much still needs to be done to achieve food availability throughout the whole year not just during the few months that follow the harvest season. Moreover, the goal of farming should not just be to sustain the family food needs. Since it is the sole source of income for many people, they should transform their farming style in a style that will generate income for them to access the food crops they do not grow, for instance. It can be achieved using high yielding seeds, increased use of modern inputs, and when countries ease for farmers the availability of credits and access to markets.

Apart from improving food self-sufficiency, there are other schemes that SSA countries can adopt to improve food security among their citizens. One of them is the development of the secondary, non-agriculture economic sectors. Ensuring food availability is not enough when millions of people migrating to the emerging cities cannot find non-farming related jobs to sustain

themselves. As found out during this research, lack of financial income, or market power, is the critical reason why SSA is terribly affected by undernourishment and food insecurity. Thence, given the high rates of people in the region who have been leaving their farming villages, there is a need for the development of non-agriculture sectors that will employ those people. More than 20% of the population is projected to live in the cities by 2050, where they will not be able to practice any farming activity (Urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2018). To sustain themselves, they will have to find jobs in the secondary or tertiary sectors which are not currently at the capacity of employing them.

In all, SSA still has a long way to go to achieve sustainable development. Ensuring food security in all its dimensions (food availability, access, utilization, and stability) is one of the paramount steps toward that endeavor. Any countries in the world can apply different schemes to curb food insecurity and the conventional schemes have been local production, food imports, and food aid. Nonetheless, this research rooted out that, for SSA countries, relying on commercial food imports as one way to achieve food security is a band-aid, ineffective solution. The region is still home to almost 50% of people who suffer from severe hunger and undernourishment. Most of the population lives in extreme poverty; hence, they can hardly afford imported food which comes often at a high price. Food imports can cost a lot to the countries enough to disrupt their investment in other sectors such as agriculture production which is the sole source of income or making a living for more than 60% of the population. Therefore, developing the domestic food production sector is the most effective solution for SSA countries. Food self-sufficiency is a vital condition if governments or the international community are to improve food security in this part of the world. To substantially on food imports to improve food security is effective if the economic development of a countries can allow individuals to afford such imports, a stage that SSA countries have not yet achieved since they are still classified as developing countries.

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