



Chinese rice experts guide local farmers in rice cultivation, in Burundi.

(Photo: Xinhua)

NIGERIA'S FOOD SECURITY COOPERATION WITH THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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Attainment of food security has been one of the focal points of the 52-year old China-Nigeria relations. Both countries factored in food security as an altruistic goal after establishing the strategic partnership in 2005 so as to blossom their common humanity and shared future. The most populous country in the world (China) and in Africa (Nigeria) have devoted their national interests to ensure the rights of their citizens to physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food

that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Both countries are famous for their wide range of food varieties such as grains, tubers, nuts and seeds, meat and poultry, fish and seafood, fruits and vegetables, and therefore, become an integral part of their bilateral relations. While stressing the strategic relationship during his visit to Nigeria in January 2021, Mr Wang Yi, the former Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister, said, "Nigeria, as a major African

country, has always occupied an important position in China's diplomacy with Africa." Accessibility, availability, utilization and stability of the food security pillars have underscored the fruitful cooperation.

The use of advanced technology, technical capacity, trade and investment has defined these cooperation and partnership exchanges on food security, which are within the framework of equal treatment, respect for sovereignty, mutual benefits, win-win cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. While Nigeria is geared towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)'s goal 2 for zero hunger, China is importing rich food resources and local knowledge from Nigeria.

WHAT INFLUENCED THE FOOD SECURITY COOPERATION?

The important goal of every nation is to attain food security. For Nigeria to accomplish that goal, it partners with the Communist Party of China under both countries' pre-existing diplomatic relations. The Nigerian government developed policies to address the problems of subsistence with small farm holdings, limited technology adoption, inadequate rural infrastructure, climate change, poor nutrition, low application of good agricultural practices, investments, insufficient value addition and inadequate agro-industrial processing facilities, outbreaks of Trans-boundary Animal Diseases (TADs), low access to quality inputs, finance and market. Cooperation with China for technical expertise, advice and investment in this regard became critically imperative and consistent with Nigeria's commitment to developing agriculture. The spirit is that if China could feed over one billion people, Nigeria can also feed itself.

Agricultural potentials and interests of both countries also influenced their cooperation. According to Zhao Linxiang, the Chinese Economic and Commercial Counsellor in Nigeria said, "China and Nigeria are both major agricultural nations, having a strong complementarity in the field of agriculture development." Therefore, feeding populations and prioritizing food security feeds into the principles of humanity, life harmony and mutual benefits often touted in their narratives. China produces food for 20% of the world's population and it has eliminated "absolute poverty" for its remaining 80 million population. Indeed, achieving symphony in national food demands and deliveries became the common focus for both countries.

Similarly, the Nigeria's plan to have a better alterna-

tive to the over-reliance on the revenue from oil-based economy influenced its decision to enter into food cooperation with China. Food security will be achieved if the agriculture sector was developed. Agriculture had been the mainstay of the nation's composite regions' economies in the 1950s and 1960s, and these had been relegated to a secondary sector by succeeding administrations. As there were groundnut (peanut) pyramids in the north, cocoa in the west, so also was palm oil in the east. Nigeria had enough to feed its population and export. But it was not until recently that governments realized the need to capacitate and develop its National Programme on Food Security through huge and sustainable investment with China.

Besides, demographic dividends and histories of the two partners as well as the skewed world order played significant role in influencing the food security cooperation with China. Both suffered from invasion, conquest, plunder and colonialism by external aggressors and imperialists. While Nigeria had its ugly experience with the British colonial power, China suffered humiliating defeats in the hands of Japan, the British, the Portuguese and the French in the 17th and 18th centuries (Hong Kong, Macao and southern islands were annexed). Civilizations were destroyed and territories were lost including arable lands where rich agricultural and natural resources were carted away to cater for the needs of the European and Japanese metropolises.

With that sense of sympathy, China and Nigeria felt the need to rise up against past subjugation and their attendant hunger, poverty and inequality, and come together with other African countries to forge common interests and goals during the Bandung Afro-Asian Conference in April 1955. Both were comrades in arms and forged a deep friendship when Nigeria was fighting for national independence and liberation. Since independence, both have demonstrated sympathy, solidarity and support for each other particularly in the post-Cold War, FAO South-South cooperation and the FOCAC initiatives. China has never attached any political conditions to its aid to Nigeria, let alone interfered in local affairs. Nigeria with other African countries supported China in its bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. The deepened relationships complemented one another in food security.

Recently, the President Muhammadu Buhari administration introduced policies and programmes at overcoming food security problems and reducing food import. According to the data of Nigeria's central bank, Nigeria's food import expenditure in 2021 reached 2.71 billion U.S.

dollars, an increase of nearly 45 percent compared with the previous year. The extant policy direction of the government as encapsulated in the National Development Plan (2021-2025) reiterated earlier commitments to deploy knowledge, technology, innovation and global best practices to integrally strengthen the economic diversion and revitalize agricultural production and processing. Accordingly, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD) conceived the National Agricultural Technology and Innovation Policy (NATIP, 2022-2027) to modernize the agricultural sector in line with the changing global food systems and supply chains.

FMARD's mandate to "ensuring food security in crop, livestock and fisheries, generating agricultural employment and services, promoting the production and supply of raw materials to agro-industries, providing markets for the products of the industrial sector, generating foreign exchange and promoting rural socio-economic development" could strategically be achieved with cooperation with China. As a result, massive direct investments were attracted into agriculture and thus making Nigeria closer to self-sufficiency, particularly in rice and poultry production. China has played a significant role in the investment drive and contributions.

In addition, the important lessons the government derived from the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to reasons that influenced food security cooperation with China. Both countries showed solidarity to defeat the virus that had endangered means of livelihoods and subsistence agriculture. Nigeria was not left out in the collective grievances aggravated by the disruptions in the food supply and lockdown-induced food shortages that sparked a wave of protests and disobedience with people demanding "we want food, not COVID tests and lockdowns." For example, an Abuja taxi driver that was caught contravening the restrictions was heard saying, "hunger virus" made him to come out and work. Similarly, the Ukraine crisis further reinforced Nigeria's resolve to pursue policies and programmes that would make Nigeria food secure for its citizens and competitive in the regional and global food chain. Problems with the grain supplies from Ukraine and fertilizers from Russia are two challenges that the government wanted to overcome in future emergencies.

Lastly, Nigeria was influenced on food security cooperation with China because of its desire to overcome the usual abysmal low poverty and nutritious food ranking by the World Bank and other development organizations. For

instance, Nigeria was ranked 93 out of 117 countries on the 2019 Global Hunger Index, and also ranked last of 157 countries with citizens living below the poverty line in the Oxfam 2019 report. Nigeria had to align with China to find sustainable and innovative solutions to reverse these classifications, and combat food and nutritional challenges.

But most of all, the confidence of the Nigerian public on the expertise of China on food production boosted the cooperation. With their dignity and pride, Nigerians did not want to be receiving food handouts but desire to be independent and self-sufficient in food production. Nevertheless, it is important to examine how the cooperation has benefited Nigeria's aspiration in promoting food security.

MUTUAL BENEFIT OF THE FOOD SECURITY COOPERATION

China and Nigeria have had flourishing agriculture cooperation, founded on the principles of equal treatment, mutual benefit, win-win cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. Nigeria adopted Chinese farming system and Juncao technology to boost food security and developed the agricultural sector. Chinese-type of mechanized farming and innovative interventions are noticed across the four pillars of food security: accessibility, availability, utilization and stability. Nigerian farmers have been imparted with the knowledge and requisite skills on tending to their farms and given solutions that helped them do more with less, and thereby built sustainable livelihoods.

The Chinese experts and technicians have contributed to the capacity development from traditional agriculture to technologically dynamics in Nigeria. "Made in China" farming methodology and equipment are being used in planting and harvesting of food and cash crops. Chemicals and agro-allied products are in use for weeding, care for animals, and optimize irrigation systems that are geared towards achieving food security in Nigeria. Chinese agro-industrial chemicals are used to preserve food, control pests and diseases. In other words, Nigeria has through the cooperation gained from the Chinese farming systems and agricultural practices to boost food security.

Grains, roots and tubers, legumes, nuts and seeds, fruits and vegetables, meat, fisheries and poultry products are more available and accessible in open market than before. Some rural farmers who use high-quality agricultural inputs have graduated from subsistence to income earners. Job opportunities and empowerment are created as more hands including women and youth are showing growing

interests in farming while some joined cooperative societies and exported food. For example, yam and cassava are exported to China and other western countries because their produce increased in quantity and quality. Rejection of Nigerian agricultural produce in foreign markets has been curbed.

Similarly, China played critical roles in the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) launched in 2011 by the President Goodluck Jonathan administration. Though, a World Bank financing, the National Fadama Development Project (NFDP) was one of the projects that enjoyed direct Chinese support through irrigation technology in 12 states: Adamawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Imo, Kaduna, Lagos, Niger, Ogun, Oyo, Taraba, including the Federal Capital Territory. Nigeria learned lessons from the Chinese irrigation system along the Yangtze River (Yellow River). All these programmes have accelerated achievement of food and nutritional security, generated employment and transformed the country into a leading player in regional food basket and market to grow wealth for millions of farmers.

The government's effort to fight hunger is on course. A Chinese firm, Green Agricultural West Africa Limited (GAWAL), owned by CGCOC, has at least four demonstration rice farms in Nigeria; one of them is the Agricultural Demonstration Centre at Ushafa in Bwari, on the outskirts of Abuja. It encompasses research and milling rice processing and bagging room; demonstration vegetable and

rice farms; edible oil production and processing room; biscuit production and processing room; corn flour, cassava powder and chilli powder processing room; and training centres for farmers. The partnership was such that national officials, experts and farmers would benefit from these facilities. According to the farm director, Dr Wang Xuemin, "the facilities are replica of modern Chinese farms – tourism and leisure, environmental conservation, agriculture, and industrial processing."

Also, during the 2021 World Food Day, the cooperation has encouraged the Buhari administration to sustain interventions in the agricultural sector to boost food sufficiency and grew the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 2% to 4%-5%. Though the impact of COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the economy. Nevertheless, when compared with the past challenges, initiatives to increase food productions have geared up through planting techniques, special-yield crops, and expertise offered by Chinese farmers and companies. For example, in the northeast Nigeria, the Chinese firm, GAWAL, introduced hybrid paddy rice and technology to local farmers where big harvests have been recorded since 2017. The Chinese technology facilitated increase in production by about 25% percent compared with the local main varieties. In 2021, President Buhari commissioned rice pyramids in Abuja. The director of the Agriculture Research Council of Nigeria (ARCN), Bello Zaki, alluded to the productivity of hybrid rice variety introduced by GAWAL as being "very conspicuous". Today, Kebbi rice is widely distributed across the country and the Sahel region. Other parts of the country have also witnessed increased food production and ensured food security.

With the increase in production and quality of food crops, Nigeria was able to feed its population. Social and economic lives of local farmers have changed. Farmers are able to feed their families, transited from subsistence farming to commercial for some income. In 2017 at the China-Nigeria Agricultural Modernization Cooperation Forum in Abuja, the Chinese Economic and Commercial Counsellor, Zhao Linxiang, donated \$6.7 billion to develop Nigeria's agriculture training to achieve food sufficiency. The China-Nigeria Agriculture Technical Training Programme was held in 2016 where over 40 officials and technical were capacitated on different agricultural innovations.

Vital to food security in terms of accessibility is transportation. Feeder roads, railways, bridges and airports that are built with Chinese loans especially under the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are helping farmers to con-

A Chinese expert team guide mechanized rice harvesting operations in a rice demonstration area in the Central and Western Region of Burkina Faso.



vey their produce more efficiently to markets across many communities in Nigeria, and likewise exported to China, UK, Europe and United States. Journeys that hitherto took several hours and made food to spoil are now taking few minutes or hours.

Another area of mutual benefit of the food cooperation is in preservation of food. Some farmers have cool bays or cold rooms, which are procured from China or supplied by Chinese companies. This innovation helps to deliver fresh deliveries of quality and well-preserved food. Through assistance from China, solar lights and boreholes are constructed at no cost to improve food production. Also through the Nigeria-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Nigerian Export Promotion Council, Nigerian farmers are now able to export food like yam, cassava and palm oil to China. The mutual cooperation, win-win exchanges and people-to-people connectivity around this intervention have alleviated the problem of food production and rural poverty.

Through the Chinese trade and investment, Nigerian farmers now have opportunity to further build their capacity across many specialties including climate change resilience by attending conferences, workshops, consultations, study tours, demonstration plots, coaching and mentoring. For instance, there are training on crops, on watermelon, ginger, garlic, cucumber, turmeric, and red potatoes. There were also training on pest control, mechanization, and application of farm inputs, among others. Some agricultural extension workers have received training in Nigeria and China. As they are being incentivized to boost their harvests and increase income, the farmers are taking ownership from the training outcome. The paddy rice technology at the Wara Farm in Kebbi State was acquired from China.

Another connectivity opportunity provided for Nigerian farmers is to travel to China for the biannual Canton Fair (trade fair) in Guangdong to meet manufacturing companies and procure agricultural equipment and services for food production. For example, traders imported multi-purpose grain dryer machines to reduce post-harvest losses and boost production. Experiences and workable practices are shared. Besides agricultural equipment, Chinese herbs like green and black tea; kitchen utensils like grinders/blenders and tableware are also imported into Nigeria. Nigerian food lovers are patronizing Chinese restaurants. This has boosted good health and growth, utilization, and stimulated demand for more affordable staple food.



The China-aided Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center in Nigeria, photographed in Abuja, Nigeria.

Farmers in Edo State and their counterparts in southern Nigeria commended the government for capacity development benefits, saying the farming seasons are rewarding. Cassava processing machines were distributed to farmers through cooperative society. Increased yields, farm input, seeds, seedlings and equipment from China to farmer groups and cooperative societies through the FMARD's support initiatives. Women and youth across the states received donations of fish dryers, solar freezers, fertilizers, chemicals, and other relevant resources that made them independent in agribusiness and horticulture. With a few of these cooperation outcomes, it is important to offer suggestions on how the cooperation can be scaled up given existing national, regional and global challenges.

THE QUEST FOR MORE TRANSFORMATIVE AND SUSTAINABLE COOPERATION

The pervasive effects of climate change, the rampaging violence the unending Ukraine crisis and the post-COVID pandemic are some of the issues that endanger the sustainability of food sufficiency in Nigeria. This necessitates the need for more pragmatic and coherent strategies to transform the China-Nigeria cooperation. Both should deepen their cooperation and reaffirm commitment to



(Photo: Xinhua)



Author, Dr Babatunde with Dr Wang at the rice bagging section of the farm at Ushafa, Abuja

food security through more diplomatic openness, communication, transparency, accountability and high standards of technological support towards sustainable food security.

More sharing of knowledge and best practices from Chinese experts and think tanks should be sought so that Nigerian agriculturists, food scientists and technologists will be able to mitigate climate change impact, tropical diseases, and improve the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Also the government's effort to revamp the National Food Reserve will succeed if the Chinese knowledge and advanced technology are transferred.

Resilience and conflict management mechanisms should be mainstreamed into the food security cooperation in case of potential conflict and unforeseen circumstances. Constant dialogue and understanding have to be engaged to sustain the food diplomacy. More jobs will be created when the food sector is linked with the industrial/ processing sector. Fortunately, the Nigerian public opinion on China is still favourable. This image can infuse confidence on the food security cooperation and strengthen their government's future relations with China. Women farmers should be encouraged with empowerment.

The use of technology such as remote sensing and artificial intelligence (AI) should be intensified to ensure adequate, sustainable and data-driven food security. Nigerian farmers' urgent needs of innovative technology to promote green energy farming and climate-smart agricultural practices that increase biodiversity, enrich soils, improve watersheds, promote organic farming and enhance ecosystem support services cannot be over-emphasized. Precision or e-agriculture that deploys digital technologies like tractor rental apps and drones for spraying and monitoring should be obtained through the cooperation.

Lastly, transformative and sustainable food security cooperation should not be oblivious of the security challenges threatening food sufficiency and investment. Therefore, Nigeria should deepen its partnership with China in providing a coordinated response to restore peace and security necessary for increased food production and distribution. The future of the China-Nigeria cooperation lies on sustainable food security and nutrition.

CONCLUSION

Food has brought China and Nigeria relations closer. They have both attached strategic values to each other to achieve the four pillars of food security: accessibility, availability, utilization and stability. The commitment and achievements of the 52-year old relations in the promotion of food diplomacy better illustrates their mutual friendship, solidarity, win-win exchanges and people-to-people connectivity. One could only hope that in the present unpredictable world order, post-COVID pandemic and the disruptive Ukraine crisis, Nigeria would cooperate more with China to transform its food system and be self-sufficient in food production. That is, Nigeria should forge a bright new future with China to ensure wholesome food security and prosperous nation. 🇳🇮