

FOOD SECURITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

LINKING SCIENCE, DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY FOR ADAPTATION



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**“Hunger in the lean season:
Political and cultural implications of food insecurity
in northern Ghana”**

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Abstract

I will present results from seven months of empirical qualitative research in 2005 and 2006 on the implementation of poverty reduction strategies in Ghana, which was funded by the German research foundation *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG). The Ghanaian example highlights the intricacies of governance of food systems: Nationally, the major constraint on food security is not availability but access to food [1]. Despite the absence of major conflicts, food crises occur regularly in the cycle of the year in the northern savannah zone of the country. The high levels and the severity of poverty in the three northern regions (Northern, Upper East, Upper West) can only partly be explained by the colonial legacy of neglect or structural factors like climate and quality of soils.

Internal power relations are crucial. While party politics and electoral cycles influence policy choices and the allocation of resources, traditional authorities (chiefs) regulate access to land. Ethnic and chieftaincy conflicts in the north, some of them violent, impact negatively on socio-economic development. Options and avenues to effect change will be discussed, in particular the role of the northern elite as well as the prospects of an envisaged shift from distributionist to market-led growth strategies for northern Ghana, which would still require substantial support from central governments [2].

The most likely future scenario is growing inequality, nationally and within the north [3]. Unless northern leaders can overcome fragmentation in order to lobby and persuade decision makers at the political top to channel more resources to the three northern regions, food crises as well as internal north-south migration will continue. This will aggravate problems of urbanization and urban poverty especially in the national capital Accra and in Kumasi, the capital of Ashanti, whereas Tamale, the capital of the Northern Region, will probably benefit in the medium to long term.

[1] Margarita Flores (2004), Conflicts, Rural Development and Food security in West Africa, ESA Working Paper No. 04-02, January

[2] Andrew Shepherd et al. (2005), Economic Growth in Northern Ghana. Report for DFID Ghana, prepared by ODI (London) and CEPA (Accra)

[3] Harold Coulombe and Quentin Wodon (2007), Poverty, Livelihoods, and Access to Basic Services in Ghana: An Overview (Worldbank Country Economic Memorandum: Meeting the Challenge of Accelerated and Shared Growth; draft for review, 20 April 2007)

Map of Ghana



Local meanings

- **Food system**
 - 70 percent of farmers in the three northern regions are smallholders (1 acre or less)
 - 'subsistence farming' is not static, combined farm and non-farm activities
- **Governance - ?**
 - longstanding **neglect** of food crop production in Ghana; a pronounced north-south divide
 - compare the cocoa sector!
 - cheap imports (rice, canned tomatoes, chicken)

Seasonal Hunger

- Prevailing in the savannah zone, most pronounced in the densely populated **Upper East Region**
 - **Low productivity** and **low yields** are caused by over-dependence on unpredictable rainfalls and backward technology
 - Farming in the dry season without irrigation is impossible.
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- The problem is increasingly acknowledged by central government due to civil society advocacy supported by donors.

Cycle of the year

- November/December: main harvest of **cereals** (late millet and sorghum) providing the bulk of food
- **January to March**: dry season with little farm work
- **April**: the '**lean**' (hungry) season with dwindling food stocks, may start in March already
- **May**: start of the rainy season; **food stocks lowest**, workload heaviest (preparing land, sowing, weeding)
- June/July: **early millet** harvest, often insufficient
- August/September: **early sorghum** harvest, often insufficient
- October: **maize** harvest

Obvious solutions

- Irrigation, small scale and dams
 - Improved technology
 - Improved livestock rearing
 - Access to agricultural services (extension & veterinary)
 - Access to credit (beyond micro credit)
 - More and better education (children, adults)
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- Ranking established by focus groups!

Government interventions

- **Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy** (debt relief)
 - not targeting the north
 - not focussing on agriculture but on infrastructure
 - weak implementation
- **Millennium Challenge Account Compact** (US)
 - focus on agriculture but not on the northern regions
- **Northern Ghana Development Fund**
 - focus on agriculture; operational mid 2008
(Government of Ghana, ADB, IFAD, donors)

Constraints

- **Illiteracy** and 'ignorance'
 - "fear of the uncertain" is adverse to change
- **Patriarchal** traditions:
 - adult **sons** cannot farm on their own account
 - impact of **polygamy** on loyalty of children (?)
 - **women's** access to land restricted
- **Youths'** responses:
 - no interest in farming, not rewarding, no status, self-perception as educated / modern
 - tradition of **migration** in northern Ghana (gold mines and cocoa plantations; big cities)

Funerals

- Funeral industry in Ghana
 - Compulsion to participate and perform
 - The poor are 'wasting' food: a major problem in the Upper East
 - Of overriding social importance
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- A decent funeral should be affordable!

Traditional authority

- Chiefs' role is ambiguous
 - northern subjects “go to war” in conflicts of succession; they also contribute to legal litigation
 - chiefs convert farmland into building plots; multiple sales; fees in cash for land use
 - conflicting role in local governance; pulling strings in party politics, especially voter mobilisation
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- Eroding authority is a problem too!

Political economy

- **Party-political arithmetic** regulates resource flow
 - an established two-party-system (NPP and NDC)
 - majority of **northern voters opt for opposition** party and feel punished
- **Northern politicians** are loyal to party grandees rather than to their constituencies, **fragmented**
- Cross-party political **consensus** required but apparently **not rewarding**
- **Alliance** of northern leaders **with donors**: there is no other viable strategy - annual forum exists!
- **Decentralisation** is paramount - and popular!

Forecast

- **Market-led growth** strategies (ODI/CEPA report for DFID, 2005) unlikely in the short/medium term; would require substantial Government support
- **Northern Rural Growth Program** (IFAD) aims to commercialise smallholder farming, but the outcome is uncertain.
- **Inequality is increasing** nationally and within the north (Tamale!)
- **Migration** was and is an option, but it aggravates problems of urbanisation, especially in Accra and Kumasi (Ashanti)