

Food Security and Emerging Powers in Cameroon

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Key Points

-Cameroon needs a food security policy that is **responsive** to the ways that the country's new sources of finance, direct investment and trade are having differential impacts on the local availability, accessibility and adequacy of food

-A more **participatory** food policy regime would enable national food security priorities to better reflect contrasting opinions on the food security 'footprint' of emerging powers and on the means to enhance policy on each dimension of food security

-Policy and decision-makers should consider establishing food security **safeguards** for large-scale agricultural investments and land acquisitions, and also for infrastructure projects that could have significant food security spillovers

Introduction

Food security has multiple dimensions, including (i) the physical availability of food; (ii) social, economic and physical access to food; and (iii) the nutrition, safety and cultural appropriateness or adequacy of food (see, for example, De Schutter 2010, or the contrasting approach outlined in FAO 2004). Through their scaled-up financial, direct investment and trade connections, emerging market economies increasingly project power over each of these dimensions of food security in Sub-Saharan Africa (see, for example, APP 2012; FAO 2012; HLPE 2011).

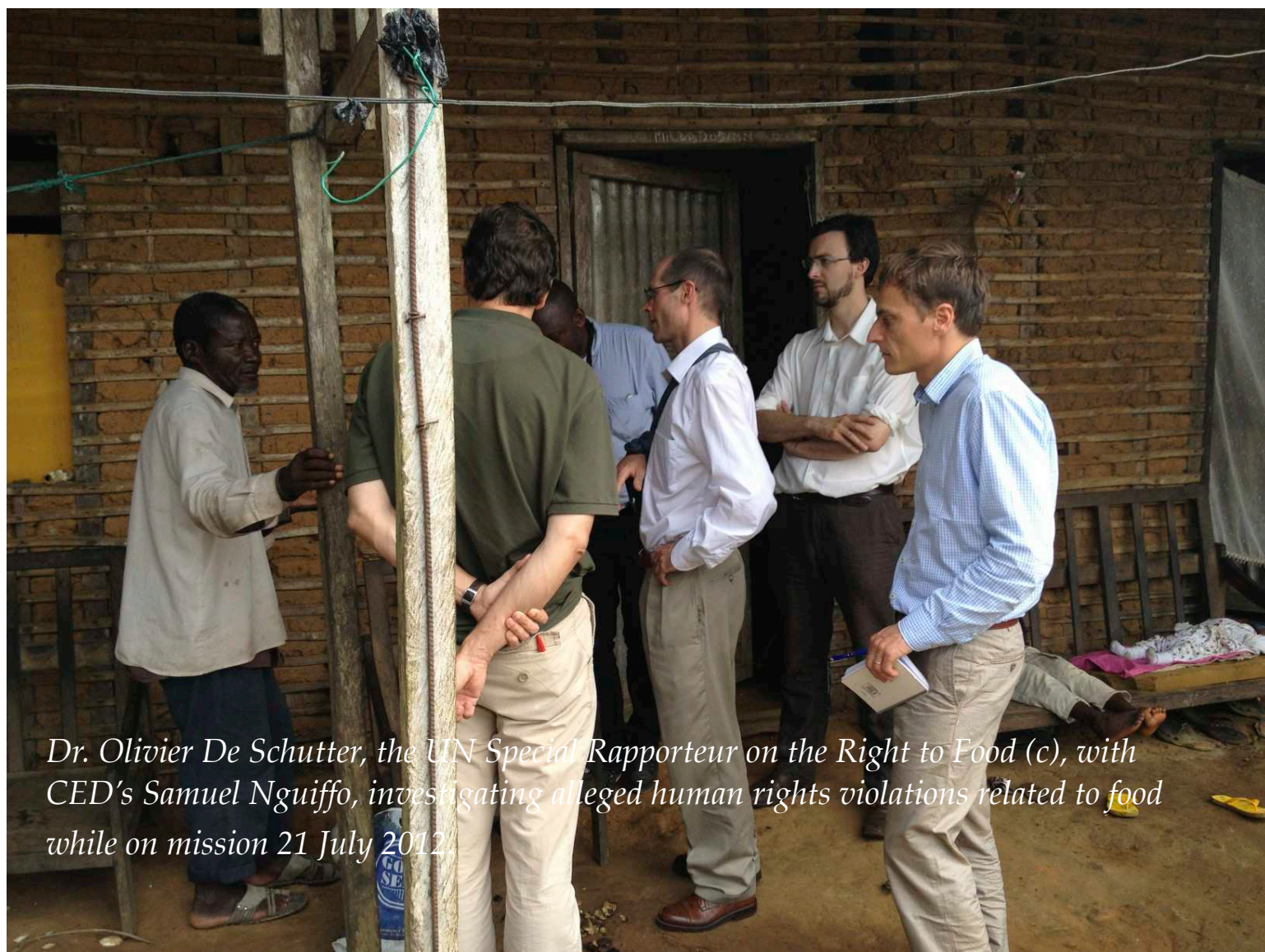
To date many of Cameroon's policies have not directly addressed the



Local rice: Some food security experts argue that emerging powers make it difficult for Cameroon to eat more of what it produces, and to produce more of what it eats.

contributions that 'emerging powers' such as Brazil, China or South Korea are (or are not) making to the realization of food security in the country. The national programme for food security and the rural sector development strategy, for example,

do not discuss the topic (Republic of Cameroon 2009b; 2012). Similarly, in the aftermath of the food price shocks of 2008, the government's move to suspend tariffs on imports of essential foods such as rice was not accompanied by a statement or initiative related to the possible implications of growing Asian dominance over Cameroonian diets. Subsequent policy responses, including the creation of agencies designed to undercut the prices of essential consumer goods and to implement food safety norms, have also only addressed issues linked to the emerging powers in roundabout ways ("Cameroun", *Jeune Afrique* 2012). Moreover, in some cases, the policy response has implicitly invited the greater direct participation of emerging powers in agriculture.



Dr. Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (c), with CED's Samuel Nguiffo, investigating alleged human rights violations related to food while on mission 21 July 2012.

Cameroon's Vision 2035 policy document, for example, is quite explicit in its aim to enable the "dominance of large and medium-scale undertakings" in the rural sector (Republic of Cameroon 2009a, v). In 2014 then, how might the evidently circuitous past treatment of a policy challenge that most experts consider to be highly consequential be remedied?

To address the above question this policy brief draws on [findings from a case study](#) of local perspectives on food security imperatives and on the contributions that emerging powers are making to Cameroon's food

security situation. It discusses how the viewpoints that contend to interpret the country's food security challenges differ depending on the dimension or aspect of food security under discussion. The brief then reflects on how these divergences make it very difficult to make general claims about emerging powers in Cameroon, and closes with a series of prescriptions that could be relevant elsewhere in Africa and beyond. These recommendations focus attention on the need for efforts to: (i) enhance the *responsiveness* of food security policy to multiple and conflicting perspectives on this dynamic issue; (ii) bolster the

participation of experts with diverse and possibly contrary views on food security priorities in policy-making processes; and (iii) expand the scope of efforts to establish food security *safeguards* beyond trade and land-specific discussions to cover all financial, investment and trade flows



Cameroonian cuisine: Traditional staple foods have rapidly become special occasion dishes



A rich array of local foods is available at most urban markets, most of the time. Many Cameroonians nonetheless find it difficult to access safe and nutritious food.

that have the potential to impact the availability, accessibility and adequacy of food.

Findings from a case study conducted over a two-month period in 2012 provide the rationale for these recommendations. While based in Yaoundé and more remotely the authors completed several dozen semi-structured interviews with food security experts. Additionally, the researchers engaged in many informal conversations on the topic with officials representing domestic and international civil society organizations, government ministries, bilateral development agencies and United Nations specialized agencies. Official documents, statistical series and consultancy reports containing data on food security, on public and private investments linked to emerging powers, and on Cameroon's trade links to these powers were also collected and analysed to triangulate data gathered through interviews or informal conversations.

Findings

Scholars have recently drawn considerable attention to the implications of divergent perspectives

on food security priorities (Chang 2009; Clapp 2009; Tomlinson 2011). They have underscored why the persistence of these divides matters for policy, and have highlighted the asymmetrical capacity some command to advance their particular vision in food security 'opinion contests'. In a rush to help experts, officials and the public more generally to better understand this political terrain, several researchers have even articulated typologies of contending points of view, including for Cameroon (see, for example, Yengoh et al. 2010). Efforts to classify universal positions on food security priorities can assuredly bring order to the range of beliefs and assessments in this issue area. However, evidence from our case study suggests that in Cameroon, categorized points of view cannot be applied with broad brushstrokes across all dimensions of food security.

On *availability*, for example, five perspectives predominate. Three of these general views are largely supportive of conventional agricultural technologies, but differ in the relative level of emphasis that they place on the market, on the state or on small-scale agriculture. Market fundamentalists have called for a

cultural shift towards agricultural entrepreneurialism and risk taking. Other voices have pushed for a rejuvenated guided mixed economy approach to managing the sector for food security, and have been largely supportive of medium and larger-scale agriculture. Embracing a different take on the requisites for food security, another camp of mixed economy policy entrepreneurs have converged on smallholder agriculture, and consider interventions at this level to be the key to durably enhancing availability. A fourth group composed primarily of social and ecological transformists seeks the development of alternative technologies that reduce farmer reliance on off-farm inputs, and that foster ecological balance and social inclusion. Voices in the final category seek greater non-state, local control over agriculture. Supporters of this food sovereignty perspective pursue strategies that aim to enable farmers to grow more of what that they eat, and to eat more of what they grow.

Our [case study](#) finds that the five-fold categorization of perspectives on **availability** does not adequately capture the state of divided local opinion on **accessibility** and **adequacy** challenges and policy



Clearing for rubber (l), tending new rubber (c),



and intercropped rubber and rice (r)



options. Regarding the former, interpretations and recommendations tend to polarize between those who challenge the scope and viability of government initiatives in this area from both market-oriented and more critical/transformist viewpoints, and those who continue to believe that top-down government initiatives can foster greater *accessibility*. On *adequacy*, advocates for food sovereignty and for social and ecological transformation are typically united in their support for initiatives that aim to enable Cameroonians to re-capture their historically diverse and nutritious diets. Differing with guided mixed economy and market fundamentalist views, they stress the limitations of government initiatives *and* of free trade in this area. In sum, the perspectives that vie to influence domestic food security policy do not look the same on each dimension of food security.

Similarly, we find that the principal viewpoints that energize local discourses on the food security footprint of emerging powers vary depending on the facet of engagement under discussion. On financial deals, for example, different perspectives come to the fore in different combinations on each of the distinct approaches taken by China, India and South Korea in this area. For instance, South Korea's project-based assistance for rice is nearly

universally acclaimed for enhancing the availability of this staple. That being said, several transformist voices challenge the conventional technologies at the core of this approach, and also raise alarms about the possible long run impact of efforts that promote 'rice-eating' on the adequacy of Cameroonian diets. Turning to India, the move of a state-controlled bank to disburse a large loan to the government for the purchase of made-in-India tractors is subject to near universal condemnation on the grounds that these tractors have remained idle and disused in full public view. Regarding China, resisting rosy interpretations of Chinese interventions, food experts challenge the provision of finance for large infrastructure projects. Many food policy elites claim that spillovers from these projects are presently undermining the accessibility of food, or could feasibly detract from it in the future.

To muddy the waters further still, on foreign direct investment (FDI), three perspectives tend to dominate discussions of the country's FDI stock or flows that are subject to emerging market control. Even so, the most prevalent contending views on each of two direct investments subject to Chinese control are quite dissimilar. Moreover, on trade, different poles along the spectrum of food security opinion on availability are prominent when it comes to emerging powers

and the supply of agricultural implements and inputs, and also to the domestic impact of their food purchases or sales.

Recommendations

The findings recounted above and detailed more fully in [Sustainability](#) underscore the importance of food security perspectives for policy within and beyond Cameroon. Even in hypothetically static environments where perspectives on food security challenges and priorities are divided in different ways on each aspect of food security, policy that is not attentive to these nuances could be suboptimal and underperform. In an increasingly dynamic Africa south of the Sahara – the 'real' world where it is simply not possible to make uncontested general claims about the food security 'impact' of the growing interventions of emerging powers – unresponsive policy is a recipe for perpetual hunger. Cameroon needs a food security policy that is *responsive* to the ways that the country's new sources of finance, direct investment and trade are having differential, context-specific and contingent impacts on the local availability, accessibility and adequacy of food. To build such a future, policy and decision-makers will need to assess local perspectives on the potential multidimensional food security footprint of financial deals, direct investments or trade relations.

Such assessments could possibly optimize food security, minimize political fallout and reduce the prospect that financiers, investors or traders might face political risk in the future.

Nevertheless, an effort to scope contrasting viewpoints and integrate these more fully into policy cannot be considered a silver bullet. Moves to build a policy that is increasingly attentive to mixed messages on food could fall short absent the simultaneous development of more *participatory* food governance. Our case study indicates that food security experts at the country level sometimes articulate vicious verbal attacks on each other. As such, moves to foster the inclusion of previously excluded luminaries in policy-making processes could lead to fraught discussions and proceedings. Be that as it may, it is also clear from our work that even the most vociferous opponents on availability remedies might find common ground on particular measures to enhance accessibility or adequacy. As such, greater participation seems to be less of a formula for stasis, and more of an opportunity for arriving at a genuine dialogue on food security. Finally, in light of this study, it is clear that discussions concerning the establishment of food security *safeguards* need to be broadened. Presently safeguards against import surges are being discussed at the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Committee on World Food Security has called for safeguards calibrated to mitigate risks arising from large-scale transactions in land tenure rights (FAO 2012). Moving forward, safeguards should be considered for each of the diverse approaches to the provision of development finance that emerging

(and traditional) powers employ. Cultural safeguards should also be subject to serious discussion given the potential for each of Cameroon's new financial, direct investment and trade connections to increase the country's external dependencies, and have an impact on traditional foods and foodways.

Conclusions

Vigilance and honesty with respect to bias are the order of the day when it comes to food security policy. This concept is ultimately political, and the new consensus that there is no consensus with respect to the technologies and practices necessary to ensure food security is not to be taken lightly. With emerging markets projecting more power over Cameroonian and African practices and diets, high-level efforts to reflect on this cacophony are required. New policies that embrace complexity through integrating discordant analyses and advice are required. The hope here is that Cameroonian and African policy and decision-makers can rise to the challenge.

[See the full article in Sustainability.](#)

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