Can We Build Communities That Feed Themselves? Rethinking Housing, Farming and Land Use in Nigeria

Architect Folasiji Bomi-Daniels | Dr. Oluwanbepelumi Olanubi

The question is not whether every household should become a farm. The question is whether Nigerian communities can be designed to become more productive, more resilient and less disconnected from the systems that sustain them.

The Strategic Overlay

By Dr. Oluwanbepelumi Olanubi

In this commentary, Architect Folasiji Bomi-Daniels invites us to rethink one of Nigeria's most important but under-integrated development questions: how housing, agriculture and land use shape the communities people actually live in. His contribution is important because it moves the commentary beyond the familiar language of housing deficits, food prices and urban expansion, and forces us to confront the deeper systems question: what kind of settlements are we building, and can they sustain life, livelihoods and resilience over time?

My strategic overlay on this commentary is that Nigeria's housing and food-security challenges cannot be solved within the boundaries of a single sector. Housing is not merely a real estate issue. Agriculture is not merely a rural production issue. Urban planning is not merely an infrastructure issue. These are connected systems that determine whether land becomes productive or speculative, whether food systems are resilient or fragile, whether communities create livelihoods or simply absorb population growth, and whether development strengthens or weakens the natural systems on which people depend.

The real intellectual shift required is to stop treating land as a passive asset and start treating it as a strategic platform for productivity, welfare and resilience. A community is not successful because buildings exist within it. It succeeds when food, water, movement, work, markets, energy,

environmental health and social organisation reinforce one another. This is where the commentary becomes consequential for developers, policymakers, investors, state governments and development partners. The question is no longer whether sustainability can be added to community design as an aesthetic feature. The question is whether productivity and resilience can be designed into the community from the beginning.

As you read this commentary, I urge you to look beyond the immediate appeal of farm cities, foodscapes or permaculture. The more important question is whether Nigeria can build a new settlement logic in which housing, land value, food systems, climate resilience and local economic opportunity are not competing priorities, but mutually reinforcing foundations for development.

Introduction

Nigeria's housing, agriculture and land-use conversations are often treated as separate policy and professional debates. Housing is discussed through the language of deficits, affordability, access and real estate development. Agriculture is discussed through the language of food prices, farms, rural livelihoods and production. Urban planning is discussed through roads, layouts, drainage, infrastructure and approvals. Yet in the lived experience of communities, these issues are not separate. They are part of the same system.

This is why the question, "Can we build communities that feed themselves?", should not be read literally or narrowly. It does not suggest that every estate or neighbourhood must produce every grain, tuber, fruit, vegetable, fish or egg consumed by its residents. The more practical question is whether Nigerian communities can become more intentional about producing part of what they consume, organising food access more intelligently, using land more productively and reconnecting people to food systems in ways that strengthen resilience.

Food Security Begins with Community Design

A community that feeds itself is first a community that understands its own basic needs and organises around them. It does not have to produce everything, but it should not be completely detached from food, water, energy, land and livelihoods. A sustainable community is one that integrates these needs into systems it can produce, manage, support or influence.

This is where the conversation must move beyond backyard gardening. A food-producing community is not one in which every resident becomes a full-time farmer. Rather, it is one in which residents are connected to a broader food system. Some people may grow food directly. Others may invest in shared farms. Some may belong to cooperatives. Others may support community-supported agriculture, provide offtake, participate in distribution, finance production, offer

technical skills or help build market access. The point is not that everyone must farm; the point is that everyone can become part of a farming community.

That distinction matters in the Nigerian context. Many urban professionals, students, salary earners, retirees and business owners may not have the time, land or expertise to farm directly. But they can participate in systems that make farming viable. They can support guaranteed offtake arrangements. They can invest in cooperative agricultural projects. They can subscribe to food sustainability programmes. They can demand better land-use planning and healthier food systems. In practical terms, the future does not require everyone to leave their work and become a farmer; it requires more people to reconnect with food production as citizens, consumers, investors and community members.

There is also wisdom to recover from older communal systems. Traditional communities were often more connected to the land and to the seasons. People exchanged seeds, shared labour, understood food cycles and carried a stronger sense of collective responsibility around food. Modern urbanisation has disrupted many of those relationships. The goal is not to romanticise the past or return to outdated systems, but to recover the principle of communal responsibility and adapt it to modern architecture, finance, cooperative ownership, technology and land-use planning.

The Cost of Working in Silos

One of the persistent barriers to productive community design is the way professions are trained and organised. Architects are trained to think about buildings, form, space, structure, aesthetics and the built environment. Agriculturalists are trained to think about farms, soil, crops, livestock, yield and production. Urban planners think about zoning, roads, infrastructure and land-use plans. Developers think about plots, sales, appreciation and returns. Policymakers think about rules, approvals and programmes. Yet all these actors are working on the same reality: land, people and the environment.

The separation creates blind spots. Architects often speak about passive design, climate response, sustainability and regenerative development. Farmers and permaculture practitioners speak about protecting the soil, managing water, working with nature and restoring ecosystems. The vocabulary differs, but the subject is often the same. Both are concerned with how human activity interacts with the earth. The problem is that these professions often do not meet early enough in the design process.

When housing is planned without food systems, farming is planned without settlement patterns, land is sold without productivity in mind, and infrastructure is built without ecological understanding, the result is predictable. Communities become expensive to live in, fragile in the face of

climate pressure and disconnected from the sources of food and livelihoods. Nigeria then ends up with estates where residents are fully dependent on distant food markets, peri-urban land that sits idle while food prices rise, and cities that expand without a serious plan for feeding themselves.

The future of community development in Nigeria must therefore be interdisciplinary. Architects, engineers, farmers, planners, developers, financiers, cooperative leaders, policymakers and residents need to work around the same table. Land must no longer be viewed only as a commodity to be sold or fenced. It must be understood as a productive system that can support housing, food, water, enterprise and ecological resilience at the same time.

From Land Banking to Farm Banking

One practical example of this shift is the movement from land banking to farm banking. Land banking is already familiar in Nigeria. Developers and investors buy land around growing cities and hold it for years, expecting that urban expansion will raise its value. As an investment strategy, the logic is easy to understand. But as a development practice, it often leaves productive land fenced, idle and economically silent while households struggle with rising food costs.

Farm banking asks a better question: if land is going to be bought and held anyway, why should it remain idle while waiting for its residential or commercial value to rise? Why not farm it in the meantime? Why not allow the land to produce food, create livelihoods, build soil health and supply nearby markets while its long-term real estate value matures?

This idea is particularly relevant in peri-urban areas - the zones just outside city centres that are not fully urban and not fully rural. These areas are usually close enough to cities to have strong food demand, but still connected enough to agriculture to support production. If properly planned, peri-urban land can become a productive bridge between rural supply and urban consumption. If poorly planned, it becomes speculative land, informal sprawl, poorly serviced estates or contested space.

Farm banking does not reject land investment. It improves it. It says land should not merely wait for value; land should create value. While land appreciates, it can produce food. It can employ people. It can support local markets. It can strengthen community food systems. It can help investors hold productive assets rather than passive plots. This is a more responsible, more creative and more economically useful approach to land ownership.

Foodscapes, Not Just Landscapes

A second practical idea is the concept of foodscapes. Conventional residential development

usually treats landscaping as a question of beauty, status, shade and ambience. Trees are planted to soften the environment. Flowers and lawns are introduced to beautify open spaces. But very often, the selected plants do little for food systems. They may make the estate attractive, but they do not make it productive.

Foodscaping challenges that separation. A fruit tree can provide shade and still produce food. A hedge can beautify a space and still be edible. A community park can provide recreation, learning, interaction and food production. Shared estate spaces can host gardens, orchards or carefully designed edible landscapes without turning the entire neighbourhood into a farm.

This matters because many people resist the idea of integrating agriculture into residential environments because they imagine disorder, poor maintenance or inconvenience. But food-producing spaces do not have to be unattractive or chaotic. With good design, they can be orderly, beautiful, productive and educational. The real issue is not whether food belongs in communities; it is whether communities are designed intelligently enough to include food without compromising liveability.

Foodscapes also shift culture. They remind residents that modern living does not have to mean total separation from food production. Children can grow up seeing useful plants, understanding seasons and recognising that food does not begin in supermarkets. Residents can begin to think differently about waste, composting, water, soil and local supply. This may not solve Nigeria's food-security challenge alone, but it changes the relationship between people and the systems that sustain them.

Permaculture Is Design, Not a Buzzword

Permaculture can sound technical, but the idea is straightforward. It comes from the idea of permanent agriculture or permanent culture. At its core, it is a design-thinking system for building sustainable and regenerative food systems. It works with the earth, works for people and produces a surplus.

The distinction between permaculture and conventional agriculture is important. Conventional agriculture often encourages monoculture: one farmer grows maize, another grows soybeans, another grows cassava, each focusing on one crop to achieve scale and specialisation. There are benefits to that model, but there are also risks. If disease attacks a crop, input prices rise, the market shifts or the soil weakens, the farmer becomes highly exposed.

Permaculture encourages a more ecological approach. Instead of treating a farm as a single-crop production unit, it asks how different plants, soils, water systems and human needs can support

one another. Beans can add nitrogen to the soil. Ginger can repel certain pests. Corn can grow upright. Pumpkin or ugu can spread around it. Trees can provide shade, fruit, biomass and micro-climate benefits. A farm becomes less of a single-output factory and more of an ecosystem.

This is also why the language of sustainability may not be enough. Sustainability means maintaining a system. But if the system is already degraded, sustaining it simply preserves the damage. Regeneration goes further. It asks how the system can be improved. How can soil become healthier over time? How can farming reduce dependence on chemicals? How can land produce continuously without being depleted? How can agricultural practice leave the earth better than it met it?

For Nigeria, this is both an environmental and economic question. Soil degradation, flooding, water scarcity, pest vulnerability, weak yields and food inflation are connected. A farming system that damages the soil today raises production costs tomorrow. A settlement pattern that ignores drainage today creates flooding tomorrow. A food system that depends entirely on distant supply chains becomes vulnerable whenever logistics fail. Permaculture offers a way of thinking that connects these problems rather than treating them as isolated emergencies.

The Economics: Patient Capital and Cooperative Ownership

The economic question is unavoidable. Food-producing communities will remain attractive ideas unless they can work commercially. The answer is that they can work, but they require patience, structure, capital and realistic expectations. Agriculture is not a quick-return game. Many serious agricultural investments require a three-to-five-year horizon before returns become meaningful. That time horizon can discourage short-term investors, but it is also precisely why the model must be designed carefully.

A cooperative structure helps address the challenge of scale and affordability. In a cooperative, individuals who may not be able to do much alone can pool resources and participate in a larger productive asset. This is important because land, seedlings, labour, irrigation, security, logistics and processing all require capital. One person may not be able to carry those costs. A well-organised cooperative can.

The idea of anchor crops is useful here. In the same way that a shopping mall has anchor tenants that attract people and create commercial stability, an agricultural community can have anchor crops that provide long-term economic strength. Oil palm and cocoa are examples. They may take several years to mature, but once they begin producing, they can generate returns over many years. Around those long-cycle anchor crops, shorter-cycle crops such as yam, maize and vegetables can support immediate food needs and interim cash flow.

A food sustainability programme can then connect production directly to consumption. If cooperative members prepay for food through a subscription model, farmers have a guaranteed market

and members receive food more reliably. The farmer is no longer producing blindly and hoping buyers will appear after harvest. The community is no longer fully exposed to open-market volatility. The cooperative becomes investor, consumer, producer and market. That is where food security, investment and community development begin to meet.

Making Participation More Inclusive

One risk with sustainable community models is that they can become elite projects: beautiful estates, green branding and premium pricing that exclude ordinary households. If food-producing communities are only accessible to wealthy residents, then they will not solve the broader challenge. They will simply create another category of lifestyle real estate.

This is why shared ownership is central. Agricultural investment must be broken into smaller units so that more people can participate. A student may not be able to buy acres of land, but may be able to invest in a tree. A young professional may not be able to finance a farm, but may be able to buy cooperative shares. A salary earner may not be able to run a farm, but may be able to contribute monthly to a food production scheme. A household may not own farmland, but may subscribe to a system that guarantees supply and supports farmers.

The principle is simple: many small contributions can build large productive assets. A thousand people contributing modest amounts can create the scale required to buy land, plant crops, finance production, secure offtake and negotiate better market terms. This is the value of cooperatives and investment clubs. They convert exclusion into participation.

This also challenges the way agriculture is perceived. For too long, agriculture has often been seen either as subsistence work for the poor or large-scale investment for the wealthy. There is a middle path in which ordinary people participate in productive agriculture without abandoning their primary work. Shared ownership models can create that path and help democratise access to agricultural wealth.

Land Access and the Nigerian Reality

Land remains one of the hardest constraints. Good ideas, strong technical teams and available capital are not enough if land access is unclear or contested. In Nigeria, land is not merely a legal asset; it is also social, cultural and political. A project may secure a government lease and still encounter traditional claimants. An investor may buy land from a recognised family and still meet informal farmers who have cultivated the land for years. A site may appear vacant in official records but remain socially contested on the ground.

This is why responsible land access requires more than documentation. It requires community engagement, negotiation, transparency and patience. People who have lived around or farmed on land for years may feel a legitimate sense of attachment even without formal papers. At the same time, productive investment cannot proceed if every project becomes trapped in endless informal claims, double payments and local disputes.

Government has a major role to play as arbiter. It can clarify rights, mediate between communities and investors, convene town halls, protect vulnerable groups and create confidence for respon - sible investment. Land access is therefore not only a transaction; it is a governance challenge. Until it is handled properly, many promising agricultural and community-development projects will continue to face delays, disputes and avoidable costs.

Policy Must Move from Ambition to Execution

Nigeria does not lack policy documents. Across agriculture, land, sustainability and rural develop - ment, there are plans, frameworks and stated ambitions. The deeper problem is implementation. From a practitioner's point of view, the question is not only what the law says or what the policy document promises. The question is whether land is actually being protected, whether farmers and consumers are actually supported, whether logistics are actually improving and whether gov - ernment programmes are moving from paper to practice.

Food availability is only one part of the challenge. Food quality, logistics, pricing, access, storage and market systems are equally important. Nigeria's food problem is not purely a production prob - lem. A significant share of what is produced is lost before it reaches consumers because of weak logistics, poor storage, limited processing and market inefficiencies. Producing more food will not be enough if the system cannot move food from farms to markets quickly and affordably.

This is where public-private partnership becomes important. Government does not need to run every farm or build every processing facility. But it must create the conditions for serious private actors, cooperatives and communities to invest. It can provide land-use clarity, support guaran - teed pricing systems, address insecurity, build logistics corridors, strengthen rail and transport infrastructure, and encourage value addition. Tomatoes should not only be sold raw when they can become paste. Cassava should not only be sold at farmgate when it can become high-quality flour. Cocoa should not leave farmers with only a tiny fraction of final retail value.

The real opportunity is in the value chain. Not everyone has to farm. Some can build cold-chain businesses. Some can work in warehousing. Some can process food. Some can provide transport. Some can finance production. Some can build digital platforms. A food-producing community is not only about growing crops; it is about organising the entire system that gets food from land to table.

What Communities Should Do Differently

For any community, developer or government agency interested in building a community that produces more of what it consumes, the first step is not to rush into buying land or planting crops. The first step is to understand demand. What do people actually consume? What do households buy every month? Which food items take the largest share of household spending? What can be produced locally? What can be organised through a cooperative? What is the community trying to achieve: food security, wealth creation, healthier food, employment, environmental regeneration or all of these?

This does not require complicated research. It can begin with simple surveys, household questionnaires, market observation and mapping of consumption patterns. The purpose is to bridge the gap between what the community needs and what a project supplies. Without that understanding, communities may grow what people do not need, or fail to produce what people consume most.

After demand is understood, the next steps are land access, capital and technical knowledge. Of these, technical knowledge may be the easiest to obtain because local farmers already hold deep practical expertise. What many systems lack is not knowledge alone, but organisation, finance, secure land, reliable markets, better logistics and patience.

Agriculture requires time. A serious food-producing community cannot be built with a short-term mentality. It requires a three-to-five-year horizon at minimum, and in some cases longer. It requires resilience, especially in a difficult land, policy and logistics environment. But if planned properly, financed patiently and managed with discipline, the model can work

Key Takeaways

• **Housing, agriculture and land use must be treated as one connected system.** A community is not simply a physical estate; it is an ecosystem of food, water, work, movement, markets, energy and environmental resilience.

• **Food-producing communities are not about turning every resident into a farmer.** The practical goal is to reconnect residents to food systems through growing, investing, buying, processing, organising or supporting production.

• **Farm banking can convert idle speculative land into productive land.** Land held for future appreciation can also produce food, create livelihoods and support nearby markets while its long-term real estate value matures.

• **Permaculture offers a regenerative design framework for Nigeria's food and climate pressures.** Its emphasis on polyculture, soil health, ecosystem design and surplus production responds directly to flooding, soil degradation, water scarcity, pest vulnerability and rising food costs.

• **Cooperative models can make agricultural investment more inclusive.** By breaking large projects into smaller shares, students, young professionals, households and small investors can participate in productive agriculture without owning large farms individually.

• **The real bottlenecks are land access, logistics, implementation and coordination.** Nigeria needs stronger public-private collaboration to resolve land conflicts, improve transport, reduce post-harvest losses, support value addition and move policy from paper to practice.

Conclusion

Nigeria does not only need more housing. It needs more intelligent communities. A community that works is one where land is not wasted, food systems are not ignored, water is managed, livelihoods are created and residents are not completely detached from what sustains them.

This does not require every home to become a farm. It requires a shift in imagination. Developers must think beyond plots and buildings. Farmers must think beyond isolated production. Policymakers must think beyond documents. Investors must think beyond passive land appreciation. Residents must think beyond consumption. The future belongs to communities designed around productivity, resilience and shared responsibility.

The model is possible, but it is not automatic. It will require land, capital, cooperation, technical support, policy enforcement, logistics, patience and trust. It will require architects, agriculturalists, planners, developers, financiers, governments and communities to stop working in silos. Most importantly, it will require a willingness to treat food security not as a rural issue alone, but as a central part of how Nigerian settlements are designed.

If Nigeria continues to build estates on productive land while treating food supply as someone else's problem, the pressure on households will deepen. But if communities begin to produce, process, organise and distribute food more intelligently, housing can become more than shelter. It can become part of a wider system of resilience, livelihoods and shared prosperity.

Note: This commentary is adapted from a Kingsgate Brief conversation with Architect Folasiji Bomi-Daniels. It is intended for education, public understanding and strategic reflection on housing, agriculture, land use and sustainable community development in Nigeria.

About the Contributors

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Dr. Oluwanbepelumi Olanubi is the Executive Director of Kingsgate Advisors Institute and host of Kingsgate Brief. She contributes the strategic overlay to this commentary, connecting the guest's insights to wider questions of Agriculture, land use, policy design, productivity, food-system resilience and sustainable development in Nigeria.

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