

Health Education as A Panacea for Reducing Undernutrition in Children of a Nation Suffering from Gross Food Insecurity

Author(s), OLUWAYEMI Margaret Adefiola

Abstract:

This paper addressed the roles of health education in the control of childhood undernutrition in a period of severe national food insecurity. It also discusses the educational support for mothers to not only ensure the availability of food on every table but the intake of adequately nutritious food. The challenges of poverty and illiteracy are like inseparable Siamese twins, often creating a vicious circle. Unfortunately, these two problems are still enormously common in Nigeria where millions of people struggling to access food on daily basis. Food insecurity in Nigeria is caused by many reasons such as the Boko Haram problem, insurgency, kidnapping of farmers and frequent conflicts in the major food-producing regions. The recent removal of fuel subsidies and global rise in food prices further escalate the problem. Undernutrition among children stands as a primary contributor to illness and death globally with Nigeria having one of the worst global undernutrition indexes. The problem of undernutrition in Nigeria may not be only due to non-availability of foods but poor knowledge on the selection of nutritious foods may also be a contributor. Health education can play a vital role in addressing proper food selection, preparation, and consumption to curb the menace of undernutrition as much as possible in children. The index paper recommends that more attention and finances should be devoted to health education for mothers and for all Nigerians. Also, Nigeria's food policy should be formulated and more attention and funds should be devoted to

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About Author

Author(s):

OLUWAYEMI Margaret Adefiola
Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education
Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology,
Ikere, Ekiti State, Nigeria



Introduction

Undernutrition is caused by insufficient consumption of calories and essential micronutrients, which hampers both physical and cognitive growth, heightens the risk of illness, and lowers efficiency. In children, it is typically assessed using measures like wasting (insufficient weight for height), stunting (reduced height for age), and underweight (low weight for age). (Britto, et al 2017). Undernutrition among children stands as a primary contributor to illness and death globally (Hall et al., 2020). According to the United Nations, “every 2 seconds, a child dies from hunger or malnutrition (UN World Food Programme, 2020). The 2024 Global Hunger Index indicated that about 45% of childhood deaths (under the age of five years) are attributable to undernutrition. This condition poses a significant challenge to public health in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) due to the double burden of poverty and illiteracy (Hall et al., 2020).

Food security refers to having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food, not only to an adequate aggregate supply of food but also means that “all people at all times have both physical and economic access to basic food”. Food security and child health are closely linked. When children have access to adequate and nutritious food, they are more likely to grow properly, have better physical and mental health, have a stronger immune system, and are less likely to develop undernutrition (Nwanko et al., 2022). Food insecurity is a pressing issue in Nigeria, with millions of people struggling to access food on daily basis. Nigeria is one of the largest oil-producing countries in the world and yet about one hundred and thirty three million of the total population lives in abject poverty! (National Bureau of Statistics 2022). Nigeria is said to be a major food producer yet faced with significant food challenges. Recent statistics revealed that in 2023, nearly 25 million Nigerians are at risk of hunger. The situation was even worst in 2024 and except a drastic step is taken by the Nigerian Government, the menace of hunger might escalate further in the coming years.

Although, it should be noted that the availability of food alone is not sufficient to explain the attainment of food security in a country; it is also true that non-affordability of food is not the only problem making it difficult for people to eat a healthy diet. The challenge of the selection of nutritious foods is pivotal to achieving optimal benefits from the few available foods. It is important to get people to understand food selection so that more nutritious foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, will be made available for consumption among low-income people. Unfortunately, these people sometimes lack knowledge on the selection of nutritious foods; such that even where they are planted and readily available, they prefer to sell them out for money rather than feed on them. Here is where health education can play a vital role in addressing proper food selection, preparation, and consumption to curb the menace of undernutrition as much as possible in children, even when available foods may not be much. Through health education, proper feeding practice can be promoted, when caregivers are educated on appropriate feeding practices such as exclusive breastfeeding and adequate complementary feeding. This write-up is based on this background.

The problem of food insecurity in Nigeria

In simple language, and according to the 1996 World Food Summit, a country is food-secured when all people in the country have physical and economic access to food of adequate

quantity and quality and can meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life at all times. This definition emphasizes four important aspects of food security: the physical availability of sufficient food, physical access to adequate food on individual and household levels, individual income, and market prices of food not at variance. And that the nutrients from the food consumed must be optimally utilized by the body; this will depend on feeding practices, diverse diets, food preparation, and equitable distribution within households.

Looking at this definition, many developing countries are far from being food-secured. What is implied in this definition is that food must be available to the people to an extent that will meet acceptable levels of nutritional standards in terms of calories, proteins, and minerals which the body needs and that the people possess reasonable access to quality food consistently and continually. Hunger and malnutrition remain significant global problems in many. According to the United Nations, “every two seconds, a child dies from hunger or malnutrition and in 2020, estimated 820 million people suffer from hunger around the world, the majority of which live in Africa and Asia. (UN World Food Programme, 2020). In 2024, Nigeria ranks 110th out of 127 countries with severe hunger in the Global Hunger Index. Despite these statistics, it is important to note that it is difficult to estimate the number of deaths that occur as a result of hunger and malnutrition as a lot of cases are not reported or attributed to other causes.

Food insecurity in Nigeria is caused by many reasons such as the Boko Haram problem, insurgency, kidnapping of farmers on their farmland and different kinds of threats to life and properties of people, removal of fuel subsidies, global rise in food prices, climatic conditions, political situations, poor policy sustainability, undeveloped agricultural sector, and conflict which is becoming too common in the north-west and north-central states of Nigeria. especially in Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, Niger, Plateau, and Benue states. This crisis is said to have claimed the lives of over eight thousand people and widespread displacement of over one million people, this has majorly contributed to food insecurity. (Lar, 2019; Aina, 2024), Most of these states are located within the major food-producing regions in Nigeria and such displacement creates a crisis for the whole nation.

Although, all other regions in the country have their share of the problem, even in the South West, which used to be one of the most peaceful regions in Nigeria. The recent kidnapping and killing of farmers on their farmland in the Southwest, Nigeria is a major reason why people were afraid to go to the farms and this further contributed to food insecurity. The country has not been able to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and is unable to offset fluctuations in production and prices.

Incidence of undernutrition in Nigeria

Malnutrition is a disease caused by either insufficient or excess nutrition, that is malnutrition can be undernutrition or overnutrition. Proper nutrition is paramount for child growth and development, providing the essential building blocks for physical, cognitive, and emotional growth (WHO, 2019). Although studies have described the double burden of undernutrition and overnutrition in Nigeria the problem of Nigeria children is more of undernutrition. Nigeria faces significant food security challenges and this has severe consequences for the

health of Nigerians, especially children. According to UNICEF, (2024), Nigeria has the second-highest burden of stunted children globally, with a national prevalence rate of 40% among under-five children." In another report of the 2024 Global Food Security Index, Nigeria ranks 110 out of 127 countries with a poor food security index. In 2020, UNICEF estimated, that approximately 2 million Nigerian children suffer from severe acute malnutrition, with half of them experiencing severe wasting, also WHO, 2019 indicated that about 37% of children below the age of five years around six million are stunted as a result of chronic malnutrition. Unfortunately, the situation of hunger in Nigeria is only getting worse by the day.

In Nigeria, the problem of undernutrition in children less than five years of age ranks among the top 10 globally with a high burden of stunted children. Medical and anthropometric evidence has shown, for instance, a very close link between undernutrition and infant mortality, poor growth in children as well as reduced adults' immune system to fight some diseases. (Lincove, 2009). Children are the future leaders and workforce of a nation, malnutrition in children has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond individual health to impact the overall economy and the working strength of an economy, unhealthy children can become a significant economic burden on families, communities, and on a whole nation.

In contrast, food-secure countries do not have this dreadful situation to contend with. It is because of the foregoing that attainment of food security is imperative in any country. This is why all developed and developing countries make considerable efforts to increase their food production capacity. Food insecurity, poverty, and educational deprivation often create a vicious circle, and climbing out of this 'poverty trap' cannot be achieved by addressing one sector alone. It is therefore essential to explore feasible measures by which these interrelated issues can be tackled together, focusing on interventions that have the greatest effect on poverty reduction especially in a time of global economic recession.

World Bank, (2003) described the poor as those who live on an income of less than 1 dollar per day and it has been said that about seventy percent of such people live in rural areas and are uneducated. Sequel to the removal of fuel subsidies, the level of hunger and poverty in Nigeria has increased tremendously. Instead of eradicating extreme hunger and poverty in Nigeria as the number one MDG goal, extreme poverty, and hunger are getting worse in Nigeria as it has been difficult for many families to put food on the tables. Yet inflation is spiraling and a lot of people cannot boast of one good meal per day.

Health Education for Malnutrition Prevention

Health education is a strong tool for lifestyle modification aimed at healthy living. Health education can be carried out in three levels; individual, group, and mass methods. Individual health education involves person-to-person or face-to-face communication which provides maximum opportunity for two-way communication of ideals, knowledge, and information. Individual method of giving health education also provides opportunities for interviews and counseling which makes it a potent method of health education. However, it can be time-consuming, and difficult to cover a wide range of the target population

The group method is useful when educating a group of people with a common interest and similar problems. For group methods to be effective, a group should comprise not less than six people and not more than twelve; the advantages include covering more people and

allowing learners the opportunity to express their ideas based on real-life situations but a major disadvantage is that it often turns to recreational activity and may not achieve educational objectives.

Lecture or large group health education method is a means of giving oral information on health education by a health educator to a large group of people who come together for a common purpose at a particular place such as infant welfare clinics. (Oluwayemi, et al., 20) This method of health education is the most commonly used. It is a simple, cheap, fast, and popular method of making presentations to a lot of groups of learners but it has many disadvantages; it is tiring, one-way communication, and fast forgetting. Health education can be provided by a blended teaching method which is defined as applying more than one method or strategy in education (Zhuang, et al., 2016). Nowadays, due to the development of the infrastructure of the Internet network and the increase in cell phone access, cell phone-based health education can be utilized along with the traditional and conventional methods of health teaching (Zhuang, et al., 2016).

Prevention of malnutrition in children requires continuity in the elements of care, but the greatest gap in care often occurs during the critical weaning period when breastfeeding no longer complements infant feeding. Almost 3 million of the babies who die each year can be saved with low-tech, low-cost care. Part of the recommendations is the provision of health education to empower new mothers, families, and communities to close the gap in post-weaning child feeding health education to promote proper feeding practices (WHO,2019). Through health education, mothers and other caregivers involved in child nutrition can be taught the importance of nutrient-dense foods for growing children, meal frequency, and age-appropriate portion sizes (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020). Food hygiene and safety should also be given important consideration to protect the health of the people. Food, for instance, may be available but the sources from where the food is produced or processed may be unhygienic and this may constitute a serious health hazard.

Drawing attention to the nutrition of children below five can at the same time provide information about past and current food insecurity/ malnutrition in a country and provide information about future long-term food insecurity (Iyamu & Obiunu, 2006). Children are the future generations. Investing in children's health and well-being is of critical importance to the future of any nation. Moreover, children in the age group 0 to 5 years are those who do not attend school yet, thus ensuring their food security can be the key to their education shortly. A mother's education affects her economic power and her social power; amounting to an increase in income and productivity and her basic capacity to process information concerning issues such as health, hygiene, and nutrition. In the face of inadequate income, an educated person is likely to feed well compared to an illiterate; the educated fellows will likely buy nutrition-dense food rather than cheap heavy-calorie food. Hopgood, et al, (2010) opined that an educated mother can acquire more knowledge regarding child health/ nutrition, through which she can increase the quality of food consumed by the family.

Health educators at every level should continue to encourage exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, emphasize the importance of the proper selection of nutrition-dense foods as complementary feeds during the weaning period, raise the awareness of mothers on

the types of nutrition contents of different local foods to allow them to make informed decisions on food choices and meal preparation. Health educators in schools should identify undernourished children for proper referrals to health facilities for proper management and should be involved in monitoring and evaluation to track progress in undernutrition prevention and care.

Conclusion

Education is the most powerful tool in the overall health of everyone; health education has enormous benefits that cut across all spheres of life. Yet, little or no attention is given to health education in Nigeria. Childhood undernutrition is high in Nigeria and it's bound to increase in this time of national food insecurity. Health education is important to increase the family's ability to manage the few available foods in other to feed the family with healthy and nutritious food. If any country is going to achieve sound health and prevent childhood malnutrition, health education must be given a pivotal role.

Recommendation

The following recommendations are hereby made:

1. Health education should be encouraged more than ever in Nigeria because it is one of the important remedies for the prevention of the problems of undernutrition.
2. The government should review national food policy with a focus on combating national food insecurity
3. More funds should be devoted to agriculture.
4. Health educators should, in their locality, increase efforts to educate the masses on the importance of healthy food consumption.

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