The Regional Correlates of Child Nutrition in Rural Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract: The paper examines some measures of child nutrition status and factors influencing it in two contrasting regional economies. Feeding and weaning habits, average monthly expenditure on food, and some anthropometric measures by age of children are assessed. Regression of nutrient intake with some key regional variables is made. Measurable factors of child nutrition vary between areas, demonstrating some environmental and spatio-economic relationships.

Introduction

Nicol first studied the nutritional status and requirements of rural Nigerians in the 1950s (Nicol, 1952 a, b; 1956; 1957; 1959 a, b). Following Nicol, Dema (1959; 1963 a, b; 1964 a, b, c) carried out several studies of nutrition in relation to agricultural production. Dema's findings constituted a manual for agricultural extension, rural home economics and rural development workers. Interest in "malnutrition syndrome" has motivated other studies aimed at understanding the Nigerian conditions predisposing to malnutrition (Omololu, 1972; Morley et al. 1968; Hills, 1960; Ransome-Kuti et al. 1972; Edozien, 1961; Burdin, 1974).

The geographical study of nutrition in Nigeria has been very limited. Seasonal variations in food intake were studied by Nicol (1957). A study of the ecology of child nutrition was undertaken by Collis et al. (1962). Udo (1971) made a survey of food deficit areas of Nigeria and rural-urban differences in food habits and nutrition were studied by Uyanga (1979 b).

There are two dimensions in nutrition — the environmental and the physiological. The environmental dimensions concern the spatial, physical and economic conditions which favour the availability and distribution of food. The physiological dimensions involve the ingestion and the process of its absorption or non-absorption by the body. The environmental dimensions are geographical to a large extent because the diets of a people have their roots in the geographical, cultural and economic environments. It can be argued that policies and programmes against malnutrition must include cognizance of the geographical dimensions surrounding food production and distribution at the regional and household levels.

This paper addresses the regional factors which influence child nutrition. The question asked was, in what ways may two contrasting regional economies be distinguished in terms of levels of child nutrition and the associated variables?

Methodology

The data analysed were collected from field interviews between March and August 1979 in Southeastern Nigeria which has an interesting population distribution and density pattern. The Southeastern area may be divided into a densely populated, over-cultivated mainland, and a sparsely populated under-cultivated northern plantation area. The mainland region is characterised by population pressure on land and outmigration. The plantation region is a food surplus area, with a high level of rural employment in the
government cash crop plantations. The main differences between the two regions studied are summarised in Tab 1.

Three local government areas were randomly selected from each of the two regions. In each of the selected local government areas, the clans (a group of villages) were listed and a ten percent sample was randomly selected. In each of the selected clans every twentieth household along the village bush paths and roads was included in the survey provided that it had children living in the household. In all, 302 households and 561 children were involved.

**Measures of Nutrition**

The following are indications of child nutrition.

(a) **Mortality Level**

- high local infant death rates
- above normal
- rising death level a few months before harvest.

(b) **Morbidity**

- Kwashiorkor
- Anaemia
- hairlessness etc.

(c) **Anthropometric Measures**

- child weight for age
- child height for weight
- child arm circumference

A child which is malnourished for some time, ceases to put on weight, arms become thin and other parts of the body stagnate in growth. Thus, the most useful measure often adopted is weight for age; it is easy to record. Measurement of the arm circumference is useful because it is not influenced by age misreporting. Even though other factors such as genetic factors, low birth weight and diseases may cause underweight, it has been shown in several studies that African children have almost identical weight for age curves as the Europeans given an equal amount and composition of nutrients (Burgess and Burgess, 1964; Kahn and Freeman, 1959; Eksmyr, 1970; Ruthishauser, 1965). From the