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A Multiple-Method Approach to Studying Childcare in an Urban Environment: The Case of Accra, Ghana

Marie T. Ruel, Margaret Armar-Klemesu, and Mary Arimond

There are increasing concerns about the impact of rapid urbanization and the growth of urban poverty on access to adequate food and nutrition by the urban poor. The high dependence on cash income, the exposure to high levels of air, food and water contamination, and the increasing necessity of women to participate in income-generating activities are examples of some of the constraints faced by the urban poor.

The Accra Urban Food and Nutrition Study (AUFNS) was conducted to understand the nature of urban poverty and the interrelationships between urban poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition in a major urban African center (Accra). The ultimate goal was to provide high-quality information to policymakers and to promote appropriate policies and programs for intervention in urban poverty, food security, and malnutrition. The AUFNS consisted of three types of data collection: A participatory rapid appraisal (PRA), a representative quantitative survey of Accra, and a small observational study.

Purpose of This Paper

This paper focuses on one of the sub-themes addressed by the AUFNS: the role of care as an input into child nutrition and the relative contribution of a number of maternal and household resources to the provision of care. The main goal was to integrate the findings from the three primary data sources and to specifically address the following questions:

- (1) Is care an important input into child nutrition in Accra?
- (2) Which care practices are most crucial for child nutrition?
- (3) Which maternal and household resources contribute the most to enhancing care in Accra?
- (4) What are the program and policy responses to promote optimal childcare practices in this urban context?
- (5) How do the three research approaches used to measure childcare complement each other?

Methodology

The research was carried out in three stages, and was preceded by an initial roundtable seminar convened in Accra to elicit the views of key stakeholders. The first stage involved a series of qualitative data collection activities to identify key issues to be followed up in the quantitative phase, to guide the design of a survey questionnaire, and to build up an understanding of the Accra urban context from the point of view of the poor. The second phase was a representative quantitative survey of 556 households, and the final stage was an observational study of a small subsample of households. The main purpose of this last component was to gain a more in-depth understanding of aspects of childcare that could not be explored through recall techniques, such as intrahousehold processes involving food and nutrient distribution, maternal time and child feeding, and care practices.

Is Care an Important Input into Child Nutrition in Accra?

The Accra study provides unequivocal evidence of the crucial role of childcare practices as a key input into children's nutritional status. Children whose mothers had poor childcare practices were up to three times more likely to be stunted compared to those whose mothers had good care practices. Care was more critical for children whose mothers had

less than secondary schooling, and households of lower socioeconomic status. Good care practices appeared to mitigate the negative effects of low maternal education and poverty.

“The Accra study provides unequivocal evidence of the crucial role of childcare practices as a key input into children’s nutritional status.”

Which Care Practices Are Most Crucial for Child Nutrition?

Findings from the observational study confirmed the suggestions from the quantitative survey that

optimal feeding practices during the first 6 months of life contribute to the prevention of growth faltering among young infants in Accra and that the benefits may linger beyond the first year of life.

Which Maternal and Household Resources Contribute the Most to Enhancing Care in Accra?

Education was the characteristic most strongly associated with good childcare practices. For the majority of women, employment did not seem to be a severe constraint for childcare and nutrition in this context. However, maternal early return to work after delivery—usually a response to economic constraints—may entail risks for children. There was no evidence that poor feeding practices resulted from severe poverty, food insecurity, or economic constraints. These socioeconomic factors, however, did affect hygiene practices, confirming the well-documented fact that good personal household, environmental hygiene are particularly difficult to maintain in the absence of a minimum level of services and resources.

What Are the Program and Policy Responses to Promote Optimal Childcare Practices in this Urban Context?

Our findings support the universal consensus on the importance of investing in girls' education. In the short-term, effective nutrition education and behavior change interventions can simulate some of the benefits of formal education. In Accra, promotion of exclusive breastfeeding, particularly among women with little or no education, could have major payoffs. Support for workingwomen in

the form of low-cost community-based childcare facilities should also be given priority, as well as policies to address poverty alleviation income generation, hygiene and sanitation, and quality control of street food sales.

How Do the Three Research Approaches for the Measurement of Childcare Complement Each Other?

Each method provided unique information but also enriched and informed interpretation of other study components. This “triangulation” of findings also helped generate additional hypotheses that could be tested using an iterative process of analysis. This allowed obtaining a richer and more complete picture of the role of care as an input into child nutrition in Accra.

Keywords: urban food security, childhood malnutrition, childcare practices, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, urban policies

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