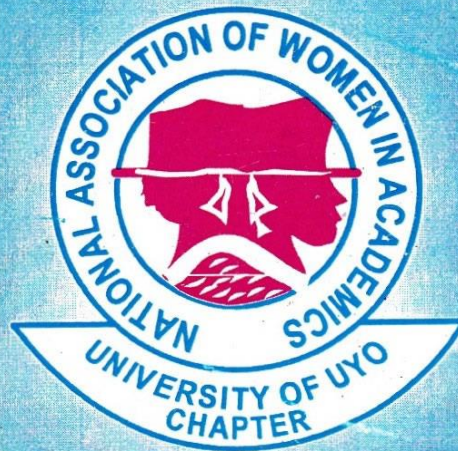


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## NUTRITIONAL PROBLEMS AMONG RURAL AND URBAN VOCATIONAL STUDENTS IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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### ABSTRACT

*This study sought to appraise the individual condition of vocational education students in Akwa Ibom State. Three null hypotheses concerned with (a) access to sources of food supply, (b) causes of nutritional problems, and (c) dietary problems prevalent in Akwa Ibom State guided the execution of this study. Subjects for this study were parents/guardians of vocational education students whose children live with them and usually go to school from their homes. Data for the study were gathered using a thirty-item questionnaire. The results of the study show, among other things, that although both the rural and urban populations in Akwa Ibom State obtain their food supplies from farmlands, surrounding rivers and nearby markets, acute nutritional problems were still prevalent in the state. Lack of adequate facilities for food preservation constitutes the greatest source of nutritional problems in the state.*

### INTRODUCTION

Food plays a significant role in the social, psychological, as well as physical life of all human beings, including children. Nutrition experts have proved that mal-nourished children are not fully alert physically and mentally and are also unable to achieve their full potentials. According to Eppright, Pattison and Barbour (1973), good health does not only mean the physical well-being of a person. It includes the mental, social and psychological well-being as well.

For a child to be able to grow and develop into a healthy adult, his nutritional needs must be considered seriously right from the time he develops as a foetus in the womb through infancy. The implication is that the nutritional deficiency of childhood cannot be compensated for by improved nutrition in adulthood. According to Ladoke (1991), nutrition is defined as the science of food as it relates to optimal health and performance. Brikley (1977) also defined nutrition as the science and art in which food components help in nourishing the body through the nutrients consumed. In a nutshell, nutrition means providing the nutrients adequate for the body's growth and maintenance, repairs and reproduction. This means that adequate nutrition could best be comprehended in the context of the needs of the human body to obtain certain food nutrients for growth, reproduction, daily work, learning and general social well being.

The developmental stages of an individual are infancy, the pre-school age, the school age, adolescence, and adulthood. The growth rate is normally high from infancy through school age and very rapid in adolescence until maturity is reached. When food nutrients

are not adequate or properly utilized or are too much in the body, there may result several abnormal nutritional conditions such as under-nutrition or over nutrition. The abnormal nutritional condition is generally called malnutrition.

There are two types of malnutrition: overnutrition which is the condition of eating in excess, and undernutrition which is the condition of eating too little of any kind which can eventually result in starvation.

The provision of adequate nutrition to the family has presented great problems for many homes. Not quite long ago, the nutritional needs of children was not taken into consideration in planning family menu. It was a common practice for a mother to prepare a separate pot of soup for the head of the family while the children and maids ate whatever was available (Eboh, 1981). Factors such as age, sex, health condition, physical and mental activities, likes and dislikes of individuals ought to be considered during family menu planning. She also observed with dismay that very little attention is being given to the nutrition needs of Nigerian school children. She further added that in the contemporary society, nutrition and dietetics sciences are mostly concerned with the treatment of ill-health instead of health preservation. However, the Nigerian government has recently come up with a health-policy programme which sets the year 2000 as the target for all Nigerians to achieve good health. The essential food nutrients include fats, starch and sugar which provide energy for physical work, protein which provides amino acid for body growth and repairs, minerals, vitamins and water for regulation of the body processes. Certainly, an adequate nutrition defines a situation in which the basic minimum nutrient requirements are met from food intake. According to Brikley (1977), the foods individuals eat influence their physical health namely the eyes, the skin, fingernails, bones, teeth and body proportions. Eating the right food everyday do more to ones look than any other simple factor can.

Growth rate is high from infancy through school age and so the nutritional need of this group must be adequate. According to Marcuzzi (1980), children suffer from malnutrition as a result of taking diets which lack important nutrients. The prolonged absence or inadequate supply of essential nutrients from the diet will lead to malnutrition. Poor feeding constitutes a serious threat to children's survival. Some of the nutritional problems that could occur as a result of dietary deficiencies among children are obesity in children, kwashiorkor, marasmus, retarded growth, anaemia, scurry, rickets, beri-beri, dental problem, keratomalacia and mental retardation (Robson, 1978).

Interests and concerns on nutritional problems have shifted from involvement on personal or family basis to a global awareness and commitment of feeding all people adequately. The nutritional problems in the world have been found to be related to a number of factors such as geographical, population, religion and cultural methods of food preparation and preservation, individual's food habits as well as economy and political influence.

Akwa Ibom State is located within the tropics. The occupation of the people include farming, fishing and petty trading. The Akwa Ibom farmland is generally very fertile. Food crops produced by the farmers include yam, cassava, plantain, banana, rice, pumpkin and pepper. Seasonal sea foods like periwinkle, clam and different kind of fishes can be



obtained from the surrounding rivers and ocean. Snails are common in both the riverine and upland areas of the state. goats and sheep are kept by some families. Also edible wild animals and birds are available from the surrounding forests.

#### Purpose of Study:

Having been aware of the importance of good nutrition in the overall development of children, this study, therefore, sought to appraise the nutritional condition of rural and urban vocational education students in Akwa Ibom State with the view of proffering suggestions on how to enhance good and adequate nutrition among school children in the state.

The specific objectives of the study were:

1. To determine the access to sources of food supply by the rural and urban population in Akwa Ibom State;
2. To identify factors that cause nutritional problems encountered by rural and urban school children in Akwa Ibom State; and
3. To identify children dietary problems prevalent in rural and urban communities in Akwa Ibom State.

#### Hypothesis:

The following hypotheses were developed to guide the study:

There is no significant difference in the access to sources of food supply by the rural and urban populations in Akwa Ibom State.

There is no significant difference in the factors that cause nutritional problems encountered by rural and urban school children in Akwa Ibom State.

There is no significant difference in children dietary problems prevalent in rural and urban communities in Akwa Ibom State.

#### Methodology:

The subjects for this study were 1500 parents/guardians of vocational education students in both the rural and urban schools in Akwa Ibom State. These were parents/guardians whose children live with them as day students and usually go to school from their homes. Five rural schools and five urban schools in which vocational courses were offered were selected from each of the three senatorial districts in Akwa Ibom State. This made the number of schools selected for the study to be 30. Purposive sampling procedure was used in selecting 30 subjects from each of the schools on the days PTA MEETINGS were held in the various schools.

The instrument for data collection was a thirty item questionnaire. The questionnaire items were formulated around three clusters with each of the items in each cluster, the specific objectives of the study. Subjects were to respond to each of the items using a four point scale of strongly agree (3 points), agree (2 points), disagree (1 point) and strongly disagree (zero). The instrument was face-validated by three experts in home economics education at the University of Uyo. It was trial-tested using 25 parents of one private school in Uyo. The split-half reliability test was used to ascertain the internal consistency

of the instrument. A reliability coefficient of 0.89 was obtained using the Spearman Brown prophecy formula. Some teachers for the study were requested to assist in administering the instruments to the parents during the PTA meetings in their various schools. Teachers were specifically instructed to administer the questionnaire to parents whose children were day students and live with them. Out of the 450 copies of questionnaire sent to urban schools, 447 were duly completed and returned. Also 445 of 450 copies sent to the rural schools were duly completed and returned. The total number of questionnaire returned was 892 which amounted to a return rate of 99.11 percent.

The mean and t-test statistics were used in analysing the data. A cut-off point of 2.00 was chosen for the interpretation of the mean values. Any item with a mean score value of 2.00 and above was taken to be positively relevant to the issue being considered. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

#### RESULTS

**Table 1:** Responses on Accessibility to Sources of Foods Supply by Rural and Urban Populations in Akwa Ibom State.

Sources of Food Supply	Mean responses			Calculated t-value
	Rural	Urban	Total	
Farmland	2.68	2.29	2.49	8.67*
Surrounding Rivers	2.10	1.68	1.85	7.33*
Markets/Shopping Centres	2.52	2.79	2.65	6.00*
Others (including gifts)	1.33	1.54	1.44	3.82*

\*Significant at  $p \leq 0.05$

Data presented in Table 1 show that both rural and urban population in Akwa Ibom State depended much on the farmland and nearby markets for their food supply. The rural population also depends on surrounding rivers for their sea foods. The data also show existence of significant differences in the mean responses of the rural and urban populations regarding their accessibility to each of the sources of food supply in the state. The rural populations have better access to farmland and surrounding rivers for their food supply than the urban populations do, while those living in the urban area are more dependent on markets/shopping centres and gifts for their food supply than the people in the rural areas.



**Table 2:** Responses on factors that cause nutritional problems encountered by rural and urban school children in Akwa Ibom State.

Nutritional Problems	Mean responses			Calculated t-value
	Rural	Urban	Total	
Flood and Heavy Rainfall	1.16	1.08	1.12	1.78
Draught	1.03	1.06	1.04	0.55
Cultural/Religious Taboos	2.12	1.62	1.87	55.55*
Parents' low income	2.65	2.32	2.49	6.00*
Lack of facilities for preservation	2.96	2.89	2.92	1.55
Ignorance	2.58	2.33	2.41	7.78*
Poor food habits of children	1.52	1.64	1.58	1.82
Cravings for junk food and snacks	1.04	1.78	1.41	16.41*
Insufficient food intake	2.19	2.31	2.23	2.66*
Underfeeding	2.47	2.56	2.51	2.00*
Overfeeding	1.31	1.36	1.33	1.11

\*Significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ 

Data presented in Table 2 show that parents' low income, lack of facilities for preservation, ignorance, insufficient food intake and under feeding are the major factors that cause nutritional problems for both the rural and urban school children in Akwa Ibom State. Cultural and religious taboos contribute only to the nutritional problems of the rural school children. Factors like flood and heavy rainfall, draught, poor food habit, cravings for snacks and junk food, and overfeeding were not considered as contributing to nutritional problems encountered by the school children. There were also significant differences in the mean effect of some of the factors on the nutritional problems of both the rural and urban school children. The rural population rated such cultural/religious taboos, parents' low income and ignorance as significantly higher than the urban population in terms of their effect on the nutritional problems encountered by school children. Incidence of cravings for junk foods, insufficient food intake and underfeeding were rated more significantly by the urban population than the rural population in terms of the effect on nutritional problems of school children.

**Table 3:** Responses on children dietary problems prevalent in Rural and Urban Communities in Akwa Ibom State.

Dietary Problems	Mean responses			Calculated t-value
	Rural	Urban	Total	
Marasmus	2.07	1.93	1.99	2.55*
Kwashiorkor	1.88	1.42	1.65	7.18*
Dental Problem	1.24	1.46	1.35	4.89*
Obesity	0.21	0.73	0.47	11.55*
Anaemia	1.02	0.87	0.94	3.33*
Ricket	0.32	0.22	0.26	1.82*
Retarded growth	2.12	1.24	1.73	17.33
Beri-beri	0.18	0.32	0.25	3.11*
Keratomalacia	1.69	2.23	1.96	42.44*
Mental Restardation	2.16	1.79	1.97	8.22*

\*Significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ 

As shown in Table 3, the most prevalent dietary problems among school children in the rural areas were marasmus, retarded growth and mental retardation, while keratomalacia was the only dietary problem prevalent among children living in the urban areas. There was no significant difference in the occurrence of ricket in both the rural and urban populations. The t-test value also show that rural school children were also more susceptible to kwashiorkor and anaemia than the urban school children while the urban children were also more susceptible to dental problem, obesity and beri-beri than the children living in the rural areas.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis in Table 1 show that both the rural and urban populations in Akwa Ibom State depend much on the farmland and nearby markets for their food supply. Although the state has a good expanse of land for farming, certain geographical factors may contribute to affect the quality and quantity of food crops realized from the farmlands. According to Stare and Macauley (1972), the regional pattern of rainfall and temperature and crop diseases cause fluctuation in food production which in turn affect producers income and consumption. When there is a drastic fall in the production of principal food items, the result could range from mild hunger to famine. The results also show the existence of significant differences in the mean responses of the rural and urban populations regarding their accessibility to each of the sources of food supply in the state. The food pattern of a place is not only determine by climatic conditions but also by such geographical features as proximity to the coast as is applicable in Akwa Ibom State. Those areas that are near the coast depend on sea food while those in the hinterland resort to bush and domestic animals for their protein needs.

Data presented in table 2 highlight those factors that contribute to nutritional problems encountered by rural and urban school children in Akwa Ibom State. That lack of facilities for food preservation constitute the greatest sources of the problems points to the inappropriate technological development in the area of food preservation. Though foodstuffs could be obtained from many sources within the state, they deteriorate very quickly under adverse tropical climatic conditions and the influence of microscopic

organisms. The lack of adequate facilities for preservation could probably be responsible for shortage of food supply in certain parts of the state and during certain seasons of the year. The insufficient food intake and under-feeding experienced by school children in the state is very much related to the shortage of food supply as well as the parents' low income. The parents also cited ignorance as one of the factors that lead to the nutritional problems encountered by their children. This study suggests that the parents could be unaware of types and sources of nutritive foods needed by their children as well as possible food preservation methods they should adopt in respect to certain perishable food items they may have access to.

The insufficient food intake and under-feeding experienced by the children could probably be responsible for the occurrence of such dietary problems as marasmus, retarded growth and mental retardation among school children in the rural areas, and keratomalacia among school children in the urban areas. These dietary problems are usually brought about by conditions of heavy undernutrition especially in respect of protein needs of the body. In families where food supply is grossly limited due to meagre income of the parents, children are bound to suffer from such problems.

#### CONCLUSION

It is very pertinent that mal-nourished children cannot develop to their full potentials. Children constitute the greatest asset for national development. Requisite steps should be taken to improve nutritional level of the children with a view to building strong and able citizens for the nation. These steps could include the preparation of good, nourishing meals. The items for such nourishing meals need not be imported, but locally available items like periwinkle, clam, crab, fish, crayfish, snails, edible termites, and soya beans. Also for constant supply of vitamins and minerals to the body, individual families should cultivate small vegetable gardens and orchards.

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