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Importance of Social Capital in Enhancing Child Feeding and Nutrition in Drylands in Northern Benin

KOUÉTÉ PAUL JIMMY¹, ANGE HONORAT EDJA², GEORGES DJOHY³, BRIGITTE KAUFMANN⁴

¹*Faculty of Agronomy, University of Parakou, Rural Economics and Sociology, Benin*

²*University of Parakou, Dept. of Rural Economics and Sociology, Benin*

³*University of Parakou, National School of Statistics, Planning and Demography (ENSPD), Benin*

⁴*German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Germany*

Abstract

In Benin as in many developing countries, stunting remains a public health problem, touching 32 % among children under five years at national level, and reaching 41 % among children from poor households. Infant and young child feeding and nutrition (IYCFN) practices depend on many factors including social factors and cultural norms. Social capital with trust, norm and network as attributes, has been recognised to stimulate positive nutrition outcomes. However, little is known about the role that different types of social capital play in generating of and adopting locally appropriate IYCFN practices. This paper aims at filling this knowledge gap by exploring the social capital- based factors influencing mothers' IYCFN decisions and practices. Within a transdisciplinary collaboration, qualitative research following an ethnographical approach was conducted. Data was collected from mothers of children under five years in Banikoara and Nikki Districts in the drylands of Northern Benin. Participant observations, in-depth narrative interviews and focus-group discussions were conducted with regard to mothers' social capital, i.e., relationships, roles, information and resources flow, norms, and their influences on mothers' decisions and practices in the domain of IYCFN. Social capital was conceptualised in threefold terms: bonding social capital describes the links between people with similar objectives, such as mothers' groups; bridging describes the capacity of such groups to make links with others that may have different views; and linking describes the ability of groups to engage with external agencies.

Results revealed the importance of bonding capital (e.g. through women self-help groups) to increase household food availability for more diversity in complementary feeding through existing collective action and food exchanges practices. Also, linking social capital showed direct positive effects when external actors developed trust-based relations with child mothers by: i) valorizing local food resources and knowledge, and ii) helping to develop and add value to local complementary foods that fit to mothers bonding capital (i.e., family capacities and capitals). Therefore, taking bonding social capital and trust into account would be a promising perspective to support locally appropriate IYCFN practices, and consequently improving child nutrition status in households with low levels of financial and physical capital.

Keywords: Benin, child mothers, feeding and nutrition practices, local food resources, social capital

Contact Address: Kouété Paul Jimmy, Faculty of Agronomy, University of Parakou, Rural Economics and Sociology, Okedama, Parakou, Benin, e-mail: jimmykouetepaul@yahoo.fr