Towards a local system for screening child malnutrition

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Abstract

As the first in charge of the child's health and nutrition, mothers have their own method for detecting malnutrition in children. However, this local method and how it is used are unknown. The aim of this study was to describe the local method used by caregivers in northern Benin to assess the nutritional status of their children. A co-inquiry with caregivers from three different ethnic groups was conducted in five stages between March and June 2022, involving focus group discussions and joint assessments. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed and then content analysed using MAXQDA software. The "Baatonu", and "Fulani" caregivers identified two categories of malnutrition: "Poutankou" and "Peouri Danéri" for "less severe malnutrition", and "Tikpirou", and "Peouri" for "severe malnutrition". The "Gando" cargivers identified three categories: "Peouri Gon'an/Kouri kawê" for "less severe malnutrition", "Peouri Takinori" for "moderately severe malnutrition", and "Peouri Foroua/Tikpiroua" for "severe malnutrition". These different categories of malnutrition are defined by different signs/symptoms, of which the following five (5) are common to all ethnic groups: "weight loss", "pale eyes", "child not eating well", "child eating sand or clay", and "oedema of cheeks and feet". Screening for malnutrition is done through a series of decisions based on the presence or absence of the signs/symptoms. Gando's caregivers' method of assessing nutritional status, use more signs/symptoms than others. These local methods of assessing nutritional status have similarities, reflecting local expertise, and differences that can be used to improve each method through mutual learning. This could be a starting point for setting up a reliable maternal malnutrition screening system that can be integrated into the current community-based nutrition surveillance system.

Keywords: Children, local method, northern Benin, nutritional status, signs, symptoms

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