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## Peer education promotes mutual nutrition learning and agri-food entrepreneurship among women in the agro-pastoral areas of northern Benin

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### Abstract

Peer-to-peer learning is known as a mutual training strategy that involves actors at the same level engaging in collaborative learning to acquire knowledge and develop skills needed to effectively solve societal issues. The study aims to analyse the impact of peer nutrition education – based on traditional foods co-developed with women – on their knowledge of and attitudes towards child nutrition and agri-food entrepreneurship among women. To achieve this, ten (10) women leaders who had taken part in a transdisciplinary research process that led to the co-development of four traditional foods (Kpankpannu, Wagaru, Boyri-Lamuni & Kaladje-Afuludje) in two districts in northern Benin (Banikoara and Nikki) were engaged in a peer nutrition education programme. They ran 150 community training sessions, with storytelling on good child feeding practices and cooking demonstrations, and 300 follow-up sessions with mothers of children. Participant observations were carried out during the learning sessions and a follow-up questionnaire was completed by the women leaders, who also used smartphones to take images and videos to capture what made sense to them during the learning sessions. The data was analysed for content and descriptive statistics. Preliminary results showed that peer nutrition education, through narrative communication, cooking demonstrations and dissemination of good practice and hygiene rules, had a positive impact by improving women’s knowledge and child-feeding practices. All the 2,748 mothers of children reached by the programme, and in particular the 300 mothers followed closely, testified that they had changed the way they fed their children. Traditional foods, which were once on the verge of extinction, are increasingly seen as business opportunities for the promotion of sustainable healthy diets. Mothers of children expressed a strong desire for knowledge and learning about certain aspects of food that could help them to develop a business, in particular the packaging and labelling of traditional foods and their long-term preservation. A strong dynamic for the creation of income-generating activities based on traditional foods was observed among the women taking part in the mutual learning process. These results are useful for nutrition education policies and for empowering women through entrepreneurship in African agro-pastoral settings.

**Keywords:** Agro-food entrepreneurship, Benin, child malnutrition, mutual learning, peer nutrition education