Mothers’ Knowledge of Complementary Feeding and the Influence of Context – A mixed methods study in Southern Benin

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Background
Most child undernutrition occurs in the period of complementary feeding from the age of 6 to 24 months. Complementary feeding includes a complex set of behaviours, which are influenced by many factors.

Aim
To investigate complementary feeding of children aged 6 to 24 months and the influence of maternal knowledge and context on local feeding practices.

Methods
- Two remote rural villages in the Mono region of Benin
- Subjects: caregivers of children aged 6 to 24 months and health care and social workers
- Purposeful sampling was used
- Data collection
  - Individual interviews (n=30)
  - Focus group discussions
    - 4 groups for mothers (n=34)
    - 2 groups for key informants (n=13)
  - Opportunistic observations 1-5 hours (n=20)
- Qualitative data was analyzed using principles of thematic and content analysis. Statistical figures were calculated from the quantitative interview data.

Results
Children were mainly fed maize-based gruel or porridge, which were seldom supplemented with more nutritious ingredients. Complementary foods lacked variety and animal-source foods. Children started eating family foods from a very early age and separate foods were hardly ever prepared for them. The median duration of exclusive breastfeeding was 3 months (range 0 – 8).

Factors influencing complementary feeding were grouped into six themes (Figure 1).

Mothers’ knowledge of complementary feeding was sometimes limited; they valued foods of poor nutritional quality over others with better nutritional value. However, no food taboos existed in the villages. Mothers made many decisions based on child’s development level and cues. Mothers had main power over infant feeding decisions, with an influence of grandmothers and fathers. The main reason for poor feeding practices was reported to be poverty, which limited the food choices and mothers’ time for care. Some mothers had fairly good knowledge of child feeding recommendations.

Conclusions
There is a need to study further the possibilities of developing affordable complementary foods by using local ingredients, and the factors that constrain and enable mothers to feed their children according to the recommendations.

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