

Bridging The Language Barrier in Communicating Nutritional Issues to Vulnerable Populations in West Africa.

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Introduction

Communication has been a vital tool for human survival. Proper communication not only preserves cultures, it also helps to forestall disastrous happenings. In every human endeavour, emphasis is laid on communication skill for survival. It is imperative that there be no mis-communication or misunderstanding between the professional and the client, customer or patient, in order to forestall serious repercussions that may be life threatening. With rising food security issues due to climate change and other environmental issues, communicating nutritional issues especially to the vulnerable needs to be given more attention. Phozia (2023) points out that a major issue in nutrition education in Africa is language barrier. The multi-linguistic nature of many African countries means that often, professionals involved in communicating key nutritional issues do not speak the same languages as their clients or patients.

Materials and methods/Methodology.

Based on the Diffusion of Innovation theory, this work takes a qualitative approach to examine through secondary data how language influences and impacts health habits such as healthy eating. The diffusion of Innovations theory is applied because it takes into cognizance not just the innovation (in this case nutritious feeding), but also how the notion can quickly be adopted by the target community. Halton (2023) points out that the success of new innovations which could include technologies or goods and services is often tied to how they are communicated to the target community. The theory identifies different groups of people based on how quickly they adopt new innovations. Early adopters are quick to adopt and use new innovations, while laggards are at the extreme, being the last to adopt the innovations.

Results and discussion

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, by the end of 2023, Nigeria had about 3.3 million internally displaced persons for various security reasons. These internally displayed persons included women and children, as well as farmers who had been forced to abandon their farmlands to seek refuge. In Nigeria, repeated conflicts between farmers and herdsmen, has been fingered as a major reason for the spike in food prices. Okwulu, Laraba, Ebimoboere and Idhomi (2024) note that the conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria affects key food distribution channels in Nigeria, causing disruption in food production and distribution, that inadvertently affects food security in many households. Effective communication of nutritional information is vital to effectively combatting nutritional deficits among the vulnerable in West African countries. It has been noted that most of the materials available on nutrition are either written in English or French language. Adesina, Ajayi Amoo, Adeyeye, Ajayi, Olawande, Olawole-Isaac, and Udume (2022) note that food labelling, one of the main ways that nutritional facts are passed across to consumers are only effective when properly understood by consumers. They point out that understanding food labels could potentially help consumers make informed decisions based on their dietary needs. Ajibade, Belewu, Salami, Opaleke, Ajibade and Olatunbo (2025) note that although many would check expiry products, a very large number of consumers do not pay attention to nutritional facts on food packages because they do not understand what these things mean and why they should pay attention to them. They also point out that the educational level of a prospective consumer would generally influence how much of nutritional facts they are able to understand and effectively use for maximum benefits.

Conclusions

The increasing number of vulnerable persons in many parts of West Africa mean that health care professionals, dietitians, nutritionists and community health workers need to be more intentional about communicating important nutritional issues to their patients. Without proper understanding of nutritional needs and practical ways to ensure food security, there is bound to be a sharp rise in health issues due to malnutrition and improper food handling. Although this work has highlighted how language barriers affect nutrition education for the vulnerable, there is still opportunity to carry out further research on practical ways that nutrition educators can get the message across. Other modes of communication such as non-verbal communication and the mass media can be researched to see how much they can help to educate on healthy nutrition.