

Bridging the Gap: Engaging Adolescents for nutrition, health and sustainable development

Introduction: Adolescence is a crucial period in the development of adult NCDs. Trend analyses suggests that unhealthy eating behaviors are rising among young people, particularly in urban areas. These established patterns of behavior persist throughout life and are often hard to change.

Methods: Research on adolescent nutrition, food security, health and livelihoods was conducted in rural and urban areas in Kenya, Uganda, Cambodia and Guatemala in 2017. The mixed methods collaborative study included a landscape analysis of adolescent programming and qualitative research using participatory and creative methodologies. A total of 1,303 participants were included in the research and 576 data collection activities were undertaken including focus group discussions, key informant interviews, technology surveys and participatory workshops to document their voices.

Results: While food insecurity and undernutrition were widely prevalent, obesity and NCDs were also already significant problems or an emerging issue. Adolescents described their diets in different ways but the majority were focused on satisfying hunger and immediate energy needs. Many adolescents mentioned the limited variety of foods in their diets. The long term consequences of the diet were rarely a factor in choosing foods.

While over consumption of food was not a major issue, poor food choice and consumption was very common. Because of a limited financial resources, the cheapest foods were most commonly bought and consumed. These tended to be foods that were energy dense, high in refined grains, added sugar and fats but poor in protein and essential micronutrients.

When adolescents had more decision-making in their food selection, their behaviors did not reflect better understanding of the immediate or long term nutritional implications. When asked to document their food aspirations, adolescents from Guatemala took pictures of a local vendor of fried chicken. In Kenya, adolescents who sourced foods in dumpsites of hotels and restaurants reported desires for cakes, pizza and other items perceived as 'rich people food', even if they could only acquire them from the dumpsite.

Implications: The research demonstrates potential entry points for slowing or preventing the onset of obesity and NCDs. Adolescents were interested in improving their household's food security and had valuable suggestions for how to be reached, including "use our groups, don't group us" and "come to us, fit around our lifestyles" and "ask us, include us".

Adolescents were influenced by food advertising and the social status linked to food choices. Snack vendors outside school, fast food chains in the towns and food stalls along the road side all position their products in ways that influence food choices. A good collaboration between private and public actors to ensure food availability, purchasing power, healthy advertising and good nutrition behaviors will be essential to slow the obesity and NCD endemic.

Adolescents in this study often played a significant role in acquiring and preparing food for the household. As potential change agents in the household, adolescents with increased knowledge about good nutrition, along with improved household financial resources, could influence family and even community behaviors that lead to obesity and NCDs.

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Session Classification: Oral Abstract Presentations - Underlying Factors