Research Issues in Child Health and Child Care

Proceedings of a workshop held in Accra, Ghana, 22–26 September 1986
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Proceedings of a workshop held in Accra, Ghana, 22-26 September 1986

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Abstract

This workshop brought together West African health scientists and social scientists to discuss methodological and conceptual issues in the study of infant and child health and mortality, and to identify new research needs. Health and social scientists from the Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone attended the workshop. Emphasis was placed on evaluation of research design and procedures for analyzing the determinants of child health rather than on the presentation of findings. Discussions and papers focused on four central themes: conceptual frameworks more appropriate to local contexts, questions of scale and measurement, the search for indicators of child health, and directions for future interdisciplinary research. This publication is intended to serve as a record of the proceedings of the workshop and to promote further communication and interaction among researchers working in the area of infant and child mortality and health.

Résumé

Cet atelier réunissait des spécialistes de la santé et des sciences sociales de l'Afrique occidentale qui ont discuté de problèmes méthodologiques et conceptuels liés à l'étude de la santé et de la mortalité du nouveau-né et de l'enfant, et qui ont cerné de nouveaux besoins en matière de recherche. Des spécialistes des sciences de la santé et des sciences sociales de la Gambie, du Ghana, du Nigéria et de la Sierra Leone y participaient. On a mis l'accent sur l'évaluation de la conception de la recherche et sur les procédures d'analyse des déterminants de la santé des enfants, plutôt que sur la présentation des conclusions de travaux de recherche. Les discussions et les communications ont porté sur quatre grands thèmes : paramètres conceptuels mieux adaptés au contexte local, questions d'envergure, la recherche d'indicateurs de la santé des enfants et les orientations futures de la recherche interdisciplinaire. Cette publication a pour objet de faire le compte rendu des délibérations et en même temps de promouvoir la communication et les interactions entre les chercheurs dans le domaine de la mortalité et de la santé des nouveau-nés et des enfants.

Resumen

Este taller reunió a científicos del campo de la salud y las ciencias sociales para discutir cuestiones conceptuales y metodológicas en el estudio de la salud y mortalidad infantiles y para identificar nuevas necesidades investigativas. Asistieron al taller científicos de la salud y las ciencias sociales de Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria y Sierra Leona. Se hizo más énfasis en la evaluación del diseño y los procedimientos investigativos para analizar los determinantes de la salud infantil que en la presentación de los resultados. Las discusiones y documentos se centraron en cuatro temas: Marcos de trabajo conceptuales más apropiados para los entornos locales, cuestiones de escala y medición, búsqueda de indicadores de salud infantil y pautas para la investigación interdisciplinaria futura. El propósito de esta publicación es el de registrar las sesiones del taller y promover una mayor comunicación e interacción entre los investigadores que trabajan en el campo de la salud y mortalidad infantiles.
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Analysis of longitudinal studies conducted in the Gambia indicate that malaria, malnutrition, and diarrhea act synergistically to affect infant and child health and mortality. As a result, they prove to be more intractable to health-care intervention than diseases against which children may be vaccinated under the PHC program.

To assess the variables influencing the PHC vaccination program, in 1985, a Vaccination Compliance Survey was conducted in Bakau and Sukuta, two urban centres within 20 km of Banjul. Its specific objectives were to assess the relationship between maternal education and clinic attendance; to determine mothers' knowledge of the diseases against which their children were being immunized; to establish the reasons for visits to the clinics; to obtain data on fertility and mortality; and to estimate the socioeconomic status of families that visit the clinic.

Five hundred women with children aged 12-18 months were chosen for the initial survey, being differentiated according to vaccination record and regularity of visits to the clinic. A questionnaire was administered to these women. Initial results indicated that level of education is associated with knowledge of disease and that visits to the clinic were associated with illness of a child rather than a check up or weighing.

Infant and Child Mortality, Environmental Factors, and the Socioeconomic Status of Women in Two Rural Centres in the Western Part of Nigeria: A Research Proposal

Folasade Iyun

Most of the available studies on infant and child mortality have concentrated on identifying the killer diseases (the biomedical approach) and the socioeconomic factors that influence mortality (the demographic approach). The latter's major concern has been the important role played by maternal education in giving rise to differentials in infant and child mortality.

The present research is inspired by an attempt to apply spatial dimensions - the geographical perspectives - to research in infant mortality so as to identify the contribution of environmental conditions and develop suitable interventions and strategies to solve this problem. This is particularly important as Primary Health Care (PHC) is now the focus of Nigeria's health strategy. The broad objectives are to assess the relative role of environmental conditions in the morbidity and mortality rates of children; to evaluate the influence of mothers' socioeconomic status; and to develop and test a methodology for carrying out this type of research.

The specific objectives of the research are: to estimate early childhood mortality levels for the two rural centres chosen for study; to identify the major diseases or illnesses responsible for infant and child mortality; to investigate local knowledge, attitudes, and practices concerning prevention and treatment of these illnesses; to assess the nutritional status of children and feeding behaviour of mothers; to assess the relative role of environmental factors (access to potable water, waste disposal, housing conditions); and to evaluate the influence of mothers' socioeconomic status on infant and child mortality.

The conceptual framework of the research is based on the ecological
(geographical) approach that assumes that certain environmental constraints predispose children to certain diseases and, therefore, bring about spatial differentials in health and death. The study hopes to identify common childhood diseases that cause greatest mortality and find out how they relate to environmental and socioeconomic factors. Within this context, the specific hypotheses to be tested include:

- that the magnitude of the major common diseases and those causing the highest mortality are determined by regional differentials in geographic characteristics: upland and sand terrains, housing conditions, access to potable water, waste disposal;

- that the nutritional status of children under 5 years, as indicated by anthropometric measurements, is determined by sources of food supply and socioeconomic characteristics of mothers;

- that different age groups of children carry differential risks of morbidity and mortality of common diseases;

- that education, income, and occupation of mothers are the most important explanatory factors of morbidity and mortality rates despite intra- and interregional environmental differences; and

- that maternal education is the most important factor in terms of control measures (immunization) and medical care sought.

The two rural centres selected for the study are located in the guinea savanna zone (Omi-Adio, near Ibadan) and the rain forest area (Igbokoda, in southeastern Ondo State). An observational study of the general geographical characteristics of the area in respect of terrain, soil, housing structure, and settlement pattern will be carried out. This will place environmental factors in their spatial perspective. All women aged 15-49 years will be interviewed and complete maternity histories will be collected. Information on socioeconomic status will also be requested. Childhood mortality will be measured both indirectly, on the basis of data on children ever born and total surviving children of women interviewed, and directly, from reported deaths of children born since 1979. Information on morbidity will be obtained from the interview survey of women and from formal discussions with local key informants (traditional healers and modern health workers). Available records of medical institutions in the two areas will also be examined. Anthropometric measurement of all children ages 0-5 years will be made to assess their nutritional status. Finally, selected in-depth interviews, including focus-group discussions, will be conducted to probe more deeply into feeding practices, child care and management, illnesses, and child death. The combination of methods proposed will be complementary and, in some instances, act as a cross-check. On the basis of past experience, female interviewers will be used, if possible those with work experience in the health field.

The study is expected to bring spatial perspectives into this type of research to identify the most vulnerable groups and area units. Such findings may act as signposts to formulate an appropriate health strategy for rural dwellers in Nigeria.