

COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE END OF A TWO-DAY STRATEGIC DIALOGUE ON NUTRITION BY NATIONAL FAITH INFLUENCERS ON THE THEME “FAITH INFLUENCERS LEADING THE WAY: TRANSFORMING NUTRITION FOR A HEALTHIER NIGERIA”, HELD OCTOBER 9-10TH, 2024 AT THE TREASURE SUITES & CONFERENCES, ABUJA

Introduction

The Kukah Centre, in partnership with Accelerating Nutrition Results in Nigeria and the World Bank, organized a two-day strategic dialogue entitled “Faith Influencers Leading the Way: Transforming Nutrition for a Healthier Nigeria.” This event was held on October 9th for male faith influencers and on October 10th, 2024, for female faith influencers at the Treasure Suites and Conferences in Abuja. The strategic objective of the workshop was to leverage the impact and influence of faith leaders to foster positive nutritional changes in Nigeria and to advance the country’s health objectives.

This is informed by the fact that over the years, child malnutrition has remained a significant challenge in Nigeria. Recent statistics by UNICEF show that over 37% of children under the age of five suffer from stunted growth, attributed to inadequate nutrition and insufficient breastfeeding practices. Numerous complex factors contribute to malnutrition, such as poor feeding practices, restricted access to healthcare, and significant socioeconomic challenges. The situation is exacerbated by continuous violent conflict, displacement, food insecurity, unemployment and government economic policies that have taken away citizens’ purchasing power. Amidst all these, Nigeria’s fertility rate remains on the high side. Thus, despite the persistent conflicts and violence, especially in regions such as Maiduguri, where numerous individuals live in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, United Nations reports reveal that Maiduguri continues to have one of the highest populations of children. It is within this demography that approximately 37% of children under the age of five are experiencing stunting because of malnutrition.

Nevertheless, the important influence of religious leaders, who are pivotal in shaping community behaviours and norms, has frequently been overlooked. Religious leaders, both male and female, have immense influence in their communities. In situations where there is a widespread trust deficit in government institutions, religious leaders continue to enjoy relative trust from their communities and congregants. It is for this reason that the Kukah Centre identified, mobilized and brought together religious leaders to deploy their influence in spreading the important message of nutrition.



The event featured compelling presentations delivered by Dr. Omolara Olagunju and Mrs. Nduka Chito Nelson. Dr. Omolara examined the nutrition situation in Nigeria: Strategies for advocating improved nutrition in communities. She discussed pregnancy health, breastfeeding, complementary feeding, hygiene and myths. Mrs. Nduka discussed the role of faith influencers in addressing the challenges of malnutrition highlighting themes such as nutrition in human capital and economic development, nutrition-specific interventions and addressing nutrition challenges. The presentations allowed for a plenary session where challenges and concerns were addressed further, and recommendations made.

CHALLENGES HINDERING PROPER NUTRITION IN NIGERIA

- **Lack of awareness of Nutrition:** The insufficient understanding of the significant effects of malnutrition is exacerbated by inadequate information, cultural issues, certain religious beliefs, and political instability within the country.
- **Current economic hardship and increased level of poverty:** Financial difficulty remains a major reason why some women do not fulfil the minimum requirements of antenatal care services.
- **Threats of Insecurity:** The persistent threats of insecurity remain a considerable obstacle in enhancing nutrition for a healthier Nigeria, as achieving food security is unattainable amidst the pervasive insecurity surrounding agricultural activities.
- **Lack of clean water:** Nigeria is one of the countries significantly impacted by the scarcity of clean water, with its population encountering various water-related challenges that jeopardize human security and undermine the nation's economic, social, and environmental stability.
- **Lack of access to quality healthcare, especially in rural areas:** Over the years, there has been infrastructural decay in the healthcare system. Qualified doctors have left the country in the midst of a bulging population. Due to insecurity, many communities have remained unreachable and even untouchable.

- **Inadequate nutrition for mother:** This diminishes the quality of breast milk production, which is essential for the health and well-being of the infant.
- **Climate change and environmental factors:** influence the quality of food produced. The weather, particularly the heat, also has an impact on the developing baby in vitro.
- **Genetically modified foods:** are unhealthy and are increasingly permeating Nigeria, and regrettably, they are being ingested by the population.
- **Limited resource management:** individuals and families, in some cases, lack the technical capacity to manage resources and apply those resources to the right type of nutrition that will be beneficial to children. This is further informed by the level of illiteracy and lack of education.

RECOMMENDATIONS-TRANSFORMING NUTRITIONFOR A HEALTHIER NIGERIA

1. **Access to Clean Water:** Access to clean water will significantly improve the individual health of everyone, especially pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and children. Water is essential for mothers to enhance hygiene practices
2. **Educational and Job Opportunities for Women:** Empowering women is essential for nation-building. They can make independent healthcare decisions.
3. **Increased Advocacy for Nutrition-focused Practices:** Husbands should encourage and support their wives in adopting exclusive breastfeeding, as these practices contribute to improved outcomes for both mothers and their children.
4. **Faith Leaders and Policy Advocacy:** This engagement should be underpinned by compelling data or pertinent video content that illustrates the consequences of malnutrition, as such resources may shape their viewpoints and foster empathy, ultimately encouraging them to advocate for the underprivileged.
5. **Improved Maternal Nutrition and Micronutrients Supplements:** Iron and folic acid are crucial for pregnant women, highlighting the necessity of seeking medical care promptly upon confirmation of pregnancy. Studies have shown that women who follow these supplementation recommendations tend to have enhanced outcomes, including improved placental attachment, which lowers the likelihood of complications such as miscarriage.

6. **Active Participation of Fathers:** Fathers should be more conscious about providing a balanced diet, which should include adequate amounts of protein, carbohydrates, and healthy fats, as this plays a crucial role in influencing the quality of breast milk. They should also understand that breastfeeding is not merely a myth or a convenient option, but a significant aspect of infant health and development. Fathers were designed by God as protectors and providers, ensuring that the nutritional needs of their families are also a key aspect of their responsibilities. During pregnancy diets rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish, and eggs should be advised.
7. **Fatih Leaders and Value Orientation:** Pastors and religious leaders must recognize the necessity for a reorientation of values among their congregants. In the face of genuine economic difficulties, some individuals continue to expend their financial resources, albeit on inappropriate or unworthy items.
8. **Collective Advocacy:** Advocate collectively for an extended paid leave period to provide mothers with adequate time to effectively engage in breastfeeding.
9. **Maternal Care During Pregnancy:** Faith leaders must advocate for mothers to refrain from consuming alcoholic beverages during pregnancy to prevent their babies from developing fetal alcohol syndrome.
10. **Adolescence Enlightenment:** A need to begin an intentional process of engaging teenagers about nutritional health, particularly young females, by involving them during the period leading up to marriage and into their later years because a well-nourished healthy society is a precondition for sustainable development.
11. **Faith workers need to take on the responsibility** of checking in on the health and well-being of pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, while also emphasizing the importance of pregnant women attending ante-natal care within their community.

COMMITMENT BY FAITH INFLUENCERS MOVING FORWARD

The participants concluded the dialogue by expressing that their expectations had been met and that they had acquired adequate information to actively participate in nutrition advocacy within their communities and churches. They made the following commitments:

1. Organize a health week within the churches and promote awareness regarding healthy nutrition.

2. Promote the practice of home gardening. No land should remain unused, and no resources should be squandered. It is essential to engage the youth in this initiative. Allow them to share their experiences, even if they are based on personal anecdotes
3. Engage with other community organizations in sharing and disseminating the insights acquired from the workshop. This method entails engaging with a community in a way that promotes the acceptance of the ideas around good nutrition. The strategy should prioritize the community's leaders. If the leaders can be successfully influenced, it becomes feasible to earn the community's trust, although this may prove difficult due to entrenched traditions.
4. Maintaining a steadfast approach to nutrition advocacy regardless of cultural and religious influences.
5. Incorporate the insights gathered from the workshop into the church curriculum, ensuring that they are seamlessly integrated into the church's doctrines that are committed to being preached so that this knowledge remains vibrant and influential.
6. A unified appeal to the government for financial support of nutrition advocacy initiatives.

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HEAD OFFICE:
Flat C1, American Specialist
Hospital Complex, (opposite
Rockview Royale Hotel),
1, Luansa Crescent, Wuse 2,
Abuja - Nigeria.

+234 (0) 903 114 9816
+234 (0) 916 984 1490
thekukahcentre@thekukahcentre.org
www.thekukahcentre.org