The potential of local groceries in preventing malnutrition in children under the age of two years in rural Tanzania

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Background
Childhood malnutrition is one of the most life threatening conditions in developing countries, where it results in nearly a third of all deaths in under fives, yet it can be effectively addressed by local solutions such as foods from local grocers and improved feeding practices. This project explores possibilities of relying on empowering local food grocers in rural Tanzania as a way to improve child feeding practices and reduce malnutrition among children under 2 years of age. We examined various characteristics of groceries in rural Tanzania, including foods that they stock. We also assessed their potential to select appropriate foods for families with young children and to provide essential training on appropriate child-feeding practices to those families. Long-term effects of childhood malnutrition include, weakened the immune system, reducing the intellectual performance throughout the life and loss of cognitive abilities.

Methods

1. Grocers characteristics:
   - All grocers had only one owner
   - Each grocer served between 30 and 39 customers/day
   - Grocers experience is 3.9 [3.3-4.4] years
   - Capital invested by the grocers is between 94 and 469 USD
   - 61% of grocers stock 5 to 10 food items.

2. Food availability:
   Foods containing all essential nutrients for the child growth and development were available in the local grocers, but the commonest foods were vegetables and cereals.

3. Food storage and preservation
   About 89% (n=199) of the grocers dispose of the spoiled (i.e. do not sell the spoiled food). Plastic bags act as a common storage material for many food items.

Results

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Conclusion
The nature of the groceries, food availability, food storage and preservation methods, and number of households served, all suggest that if local groceries empowered with appropriate knowledge on child nutrition, and appropriate feeding practices, have the potential to support families with young children in their respective areas to improve their child-feeding practices. Such a grocer-empowerment scheme can be used in low and middle income communities to reduce malnutrition among infants and young children.