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Recentering Community Nutrition Education: A New Framework for Food Insecurity Understanding

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Abstract. While strategies may differ across geographical regions, FACS Extension professionals work to enhance nutrition education and increase food security in their communities. The four dimensions of food security developed by The Food and Agricultural Organization were reconceptualized to understand food security on an individual or at a community level. Using experiences from a summer internship with two urban counties, the EEUESA Model described here was designed to aid FACS Extension professionals in their efforts for nutrition education and to better understand how programming targets food security in their communities.

INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing challenge for Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) Extension professionals to understand the needs of individuals as diversity within communities grows and technology is ever evolving (Atiles & Eubanks, 2014). Although programming strategies may differ across geographical regions, FACS Extension professionals address similar program topics, including health, family, food, home, textiles, money, and child development. More specifically, FACS Extension professionals work to enhance nutrition education and increase food security in their communities.

During the 1996 World Food Summit, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO; 2008) announced, "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." Through this definition, FAO (2008) identified four dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilization, and stability. These four dimensions of food security guide research for scholars across the globe (e.g., Lawlis et al., 2018; Mechiche-Alami et al., 2021; Méthot & Bennett, 2018).

These four dimensions shift from availability, which describes food security at the national level, to utilization, which is the perspective from an individual or community level. Access falls in the middle and can be influenced by national supplies (what farms are producing) or local policy and markets (what is available to consumers). Stability is achieved only when the other three dimensions simultaneously occur over time. Although this model is unique in its multilevel approach to understanding food security, some scholars show concern for flaws in reasonings surrounding how data are collected and measured and the use of a caloric-based approach to understanding food security through hunger (Burchi et al., 2011).

RECONCEPTUALIZATION

The four dimensions of food security developed by FAO were reconceptualized to understand food security on an individual or at a community level. The EEUESA (you-sa) Model described here was designed to aid FACS Extension professionals in their efforts for nutrition education and to better understand how programming targets food security in their communities. The author used experiences from a summer internship with two urban counties to develop the model. Sample action items are provided for FACS professionals to achieve each level of the model.

The EEUESA Model (see Figure 1) was developed primarily for use by FACS Extension professionals, although it can work with any nutrition education organization. The model can be used by Extension professionals to self-evaluate their programming efforts to address nutrition education at an individual level, while aiming for food security at a community level. The goal is for Extension professionals to develop or implement programming in their community that covers all levels of the model by delivering lessons or activities that target one or more of the levels.

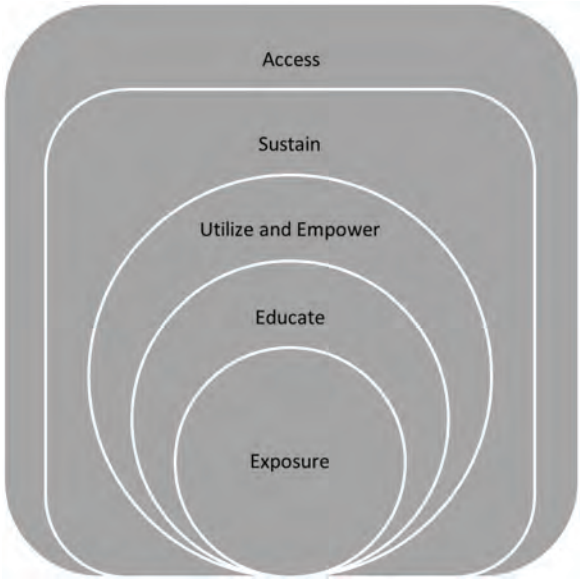

Figure 1. EEUESA nutrition education model.

The inner three levels of the model (exposure, educate, and utilize and empower) represent one component of FACS Extension programming that leads to sustaining food security in communities. Although professionals may not explicitly address each level in specific program objectives, the design of the model allows professionals to move through three levels fluidly to build up to sustainability. This flexibility gives space for FACS Extension professionals to implement programming that addresses the needs of subcommunities within their target community. The outer level of the model is derived from the prior assumption that people have economic and physical access to purchase food (FAO, 2008). Access, in this context, is about community development and placements of food deserts in counties.

EXPOSURE

There is not an assumption that people do not have knowledge of various produce or food ingredients. However, we can assume that different cultures have been exposed to various resources. Extension professionals can do the following:

- Increase exposure to fruits, vegetables, and other food ingredients. This exposure may be new, but it may also be a reintroduction.
- Introduce a known food item in a new way.
- Deliver weekly produce bags to low-income communities.
- Implement a fruit or vegetable of the week by matching produce to the colors of the rainbow (e.g., red-tomato, orange-peach, yellow-squash, green-spinach, blue-blueberry, purple-eggplant) with recipes, food demonstrations, and samples.

EDUCATE

This level of the model builds on the prior assumption that people have access to sanitary places to cook meals, safe drinking water, and proper food storage (FAO, 2008). For this model, there is an emphasis in this stage on good nutrition. Once people are exposed to fruits, vegetables, and other food items, they need to know what to do with them: how to prepare, store, cook, or preserve. Educational programming looks very different, depending

on community need, geographic location, and resources. Education could be in person, virtual, or in blended learning environments.

Extension professionals can do the following:

- Offer education on kitchen and cooking skills (e.g., washing hands, cleaning produce, chilling, cooking, cutting, storing).
- Broadcast virtual educational lessons and food demonstrations weekly.
- Showcase a weekly fruit/vegetable with fun facts, ways kids can help, and cooking tips.

UTILIZE AND EMPOWER

This level of the model builds on the prior assumption that people have the confidence to and are comfortable with preparing and serving healthy meals to themselves and others (FAO, 2008). Once people know how to use fresh, canned, or frozen fruits, vegetables, or other food items, the goal is for them to be empowered to use that information to prepare and serve healthy meals to themselves and others.

Extension professionals can do the following:

- Encourage program participation through in-person food delivery and weekly digital lessons.
- Focus on making healthy meals fun and enjoyable for families through weekly programming.
- Rely on community engagement, relationship building, and partnerships to empower adults and families to incorporate nutrition at home.

SUSTAIN

This level of the model comes from the assumption that there is constant access to healthy food choices by producers (FAO, 2008). It is also assumed that consumers can make food choices in a healthy, enjoyable way through exposure, education, and empowerment. This pillar becomes two-fold for this model.

Once people are empowered to create nutritional recipes, the long-term goal is for them to continue implementing this within their homes, sustaining healthy choices over a longer period. There is also the community-based sustainability of increasing the stability of production and distribution through transitory, seasonal, or chronic food-insecurity patterns.

ACCESS

This could include access to grocery stores or farmers markets, access to financial means, or access to transportation. FACS Extension professionals can incorporate programming in health/nutrition (e.g., meal planning) or finance (e.g., budgeting tips) or provide greater direct access to fresh produce. Under the assumption that people have sufficient resources to produce and/or food, Extension professionals can then build through the framework to address ways to incorporate health/nutrition into their daily lives and can incorporate access into each of the levels if this assumption is not met.

CONCLUSION

To serve and meet the needs of their communities, FACS Extension professionals must engage in intentional programming that ensures exposure, education, and utilization and empowerment to bring individual, family, and community-based sustainability. Creating a culture of food security with our programming helps fulfill the land-grant mission we all strive for.

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