

An Appraisal Analysis of Nigerian Press Narratives on Indigenous African Food Systems as Sustainable Response to Child Malnutrition in Nigeria

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Abstract

Child malnutrition in Nigeria has been widely investigated, but the ways in which language shapes this public health challenge are insufficiently examined; hence, this study responds to this gap by focusing on press discourse. Using news reports from two prominent Nigerian newspapers, *The Nation* and *Punch*, the research adopts a qualitative design informed by Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory to analyse how evaluative meanings are constructed around indigenous African food systems. The study identifies five appraisal resources that organise recurrent concerns in the coverage, including the magnitude and seriousness of harm experienced by children, obstacles to effective nutritional response, the dietary and socio-cultural importance of local food traditions and indigenous food arrangements presented as practical routes for addressing child malnutrition. It further shows how these evaluative patterns amplify a sense of urgency, validate indigenous knowledge and frame local food resources as credible and sustainable options within Nigerian child nutrition debates. The study ends by recommending that future work extend this line of inquiry through other branches of language study, such as pragmatics and corpus-based analysis, to enrich understanding of how discourse influences public perceptions, policy choices and the uptake of indigenous food practices in tackling child malnutrition.

Keywords: Child malnutrition, Newspaper reports, Indigenous food, Appraisal resources

Introduction

The future of every nation is first inscribed in the health, dignity and survival of its children. At the prenatal and postnatal stages of life, nutrition is important for the growth, sustenance and development of every child (Nsude and Nwanchor, 2017). Hence, where adequate nutrition is absent, childhood becomes a site of deprivation in which the rights to healthy growth, cognitive development, wellbeing and human dignity are

systematically undermined. Apparently, child malnutrition is a serious public health challenge that drastically affects the health and development of a child (Suchana, et al 2026). As noted by Opara et al (2023), it is a situation whereby a child is not provided adequate and appropriate nutrients from diet as a result of various factors which differ from one geographical setting/region to another. Worldwide, millions of children suffer from malnutrition (Vissoh et al, 2024). In Nigeria, the persistent crisis of child malnutrition has gradually transcended the boundaries of public health concern to become a profound social injustice and a subtle violation of children's rights. The reality that millions of Nigerian children continue to experience stunting, wasting, undernourishment and micronutrient deficiencies within a country richly endowed with various agricultural and indigenous food resources presents a disturbing paradox. It raises critical questions not only about food insecurity and poverty, but also about the cultural, political and communicative structures that shape national responses to child nutrition. For instance, According to the report of the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), the prevalence of stunting among children up to 60 months was 37%, with 17% classified as severely stunted. The report also showed that 29% were either underweight or severely underweight, while 9% were either wasted or severely wasted (Amusa, Yahya, & Bengesai, 2023).

Within African societies, indigenous food practices have historically functioned as systems of survival, healing and communal wellbeing. Long before the emergence of industrial food systems and imported dietary patterns, African communities relied on nutrient rich local foods, traditional preservation methods and culturally transmitted feeding practices to sustain healthy living. For example, African indigenous fruits and vegetables are widely valued in traditional medicine for their healing benefits (Aworh 2023). In addition, most of them contain antimicrobial and anti-parasitic properties and are commonly useful in the treatment of numerous health conditions like stomach pain, dysentery, coughs, anemia, diarrhea, diabetes, hemorrhoids, malaria, intestinal worms and other parasites, as well as infections affecting the skin, mouth, eyes and reproductive system (Chothani & Vaghasiya, 2011; Opande et al., 2017). Indigenous foods such as millet, sorghum, acha, yam, beans, moringa, vegetables, fermented cereals and traditional soups provided balanced nutritional value adapted to local environmental realities. These food practices were not merely culinary traditions, but constituted

indigenous knowledge systems deeply connected to health, sustainability, and social continuity. However, the forces of globalisation, urbanisation, western dietary influence and changing consumption patterns have increasingly displaced these traditional food systems, often presenting foreign food cultures as symbols of modernity while indigenous foods are relegated to the margins of public preference and policy attention.

Amidst this nutritional and cultural transition, the Nigerian press occupies a strategic position in shaping public consciousness and directing national discourse on health, food security and social development. As a critical institution of agenda setting and social representation, the press influences how issues are understood, prioritised, and responded to within society. Further, the media, which serves as a platform for education and creation of awareness employ carefully selected linguistic expressions to report societal/global issues in ways that reflect ideological perspectives and influence public understanding and opinion formation (Rajput, 2014; Iqbal, et al 2024; Osisanwo 2024; Nasrullah, et al 2026). Media narratives surrounding food, nutrition, and child welfare possess the capacity to either reinforce indigenous solutions or contribute to their invisibility. The manner in which Nigerian newspapers frame indigenous African food practices in relation to child malnutrition therefore becomes an important site of intellectual and developmental inquiry. Press narratives do not merely report reality; they construct meanings, legitimise ideologies, and shape public attitudes towards social problems and proposed solutions.

Therefore, this study undertakes an appraisal analysis of Nigerian press narratives on indigenous African food practices as a sustainable response to child malnutrition in Nigeria, with particular focus on news reports documented in Nigerian newspapers. Newspapers, as one of the oldest forms of communication, have for centuries served the information needs of an ever-growing audience in society by providing news, information, education and entertainment (Obiaje and Ikuesowo-Akinbami, 2024; Okoha and Agaku, 2025). Therefore, the focus on newspaper coverage is expedient because newspapers remain influential instruments for information dissemination, public education, policy engagement and construction of national development priorities. Through editorials, feature stories, health reports, and news analyses, newspapers shape public understanding of nutritional issues and influence governmental and societal responses to child welfare concerns. Examining selected Nigerian newspapers therefore provides an opportunity to

critically evaluate the extent to which the press foregrounds indigenous food systems as sustainable nutritional interventions capable of addressing the growing crisis of child malnutrition.

Furthermore, the study becomes necessary in view of the increasing dependence on foreign dietary models and commercial food narratives that often overshadow the nutritional relevance of indigenous African foods within mainstream media discourse. By analysing how selected Nigerian newspaper reports frame and interpret indigenous food practices, this research helps to uncover whether media narratives support the revitalisation of local food knowledge systems or inadvertently contribute to their marginalisation. The significance of this study lies in its intersection of media studies, nutrition discourse, cultural sustainability and children's rights. At a time when global conversations increasingly advocate sustainable and locally driven approaches to development, this research contributes to intellectual debates on how indigenous African knowledge systems can address contemporary social challenges. Notably, the study advances the argument that addressing child malnutrition, through indigenous African food practices is not simply a nutritional strategy, but also a moral and social commitment towards protecting the fundamental rights and future of Nigerian children. The study, thus, addresses two significant research questions: a) what are the thematic concerns raised on the use of African indigenous food systems to curb/prevent child malnutrition in Nigerian newspaper reports (NNRs)? b) What are the appraisal resources deployed to evaluate the use of African indigenous food systems to curb/prevent child malnutrition in the NNRs?

(News)Media Narratives and Child Welfare Discourse

The media provides an important arena for reporting, discussing, interrogating and contesting issues relating to children. Given the indispensable place of children in the continuity and development of every society and their susceptibility to different forms of harm, a substantial body of research has examined issues affecting their welfare with the aim of identifying solutions to the challenges they face. Among these are studies on child abuse and children's rights, where scholars from both linguistic and non-linguistic disciplines have examined how the media, with specific reference to newspapers within and outside Nigeria, engage with different forms of child maltreatment (Saint-Jacques et al., 2011; Isik, 2016; Ojiakor et al., 2019; Halim & Singh, 2023; Nsude & Onu, 2023;

Olajimbati & Osisanwo, 2024). Evidence from these studies reflects public concerns about child abuse and draws attention to the diverse forms of vulnerability experienced by children. The findings also reinforce the view that the welfare and protection of children should remain a priority for every society because they constitute the future generation of citizens and leaders. The care, protection and opportunities available to children during their formative years inevitably shape their contributions to society in adulthood. This explains the establishment of child protection systems in Africa (Orock, 2025) and other countries across the continent.

Although a number of these studies acknowledge the media's contribution to the promotion and protection of children's rights, others present a less optimistic assessment. Agboola (2020), for instance, argues that media reportage of children's rights is constrained by a number of challenges. Beyond child abuse and children's rights, another dimension of child welfare that has attracted scholarly interest is children's health, with emphasis on nutrition. Nutrition is fundamental to human growth and development because physical development is closely associated with dietary intake. Olanrewaju and Odubunmi (2012), in their study of children's healthcare in Nigeria, find out that female children have a higher probability of seeking healthcare services than their male counterparts. Regardless, all children are expected to be taken care of and subjected to sound medical and nutritional care. One of the fundamental ways of promoting children's well-being is through the provision and maintenance of proper nutrition. Despite its importance, academic documentations show that many children, especially in Nigeria, experience malnutrition, resulting in stunted growth and, in some cases, death. Amusa et al. (2023), in their investigation of the magnitude and epidemiology of malnutrition in Nigeria, contend that the burden of malnutrition in the country remains substantial. This reality underscores the need to increase public awareness of child malnutrition and the various approaches available to address it within the Nigerian context.

Existing studies have examined different strategies for addressing child malnutrition. Salawu, et al (2022), for instance, identify women's empowerment as one of the measures capable of reducing child malnutrition, precisely in rural communities in Nigeria. Similarly, Graziose et al. (2017) demonstrate the effectiveness of the mass media in addressing issues of child malnutrition. These studies point to the importance of sustained public engagement in efforts aimed at preventing

child nutrition. The media occupies a central position in societies committed to social, economic and political development. Individuals, communities and institutions rely extensively on the information circulated through different media platforms to understand events and issues that shape everyday life. This position is aptly captured by Talbot (2007: 3), who observes that "the importance of the media in the modern world is incontrovertible" because it constitutes the "primary source of understanding the world." This explains why the media continues to attract a wide audience and remain an influential channel of public communication.

Further, Osisanwo (2016: 31) observes that the media shape public opinion through their ability to present "a particular version as reality." Among the various forms of mass media, newspapers is one of the most trusted sources of information and public affairs. Through newspaper discourse, information is communicated in ways that attract public attention and influence the interpretation of social issues. In reporting child malnutrition in Nigeria, newspaper texts utilise carefully selected linguistic resources to portray the nature, prevalence and implications of the problem. Although previous studies have investigated child malnutrition and recognised the contribution of the media, what remains less clearly understood is the way Nigerian newspapers deploy evaluative language to construct narratives of indigenous African food systems as a sustainable response to child malnutrition in Nigeria. Drawing on Martin and White's Appraisal theory, this study examines appraisal elements used in Nigerian newspaper reports on indigenous African food systems as a sustainable response to child malnutrition in Nigeria. The study extends linguistic scholarship on child welfare discourse by revealing how evaluative meanings are strategically mobilised in newspaper reports to construct indigenous African Food systems as a sustainable response to child malnutrition. Such insights provide discourse analysts, media scholars, health communication researchers and newspaper practitioners with a clearer understanding of how evaluative language shapes public engagement with indigenous nutritional interventions, while also offering an evidence-based linguistic perspective capable of enriching future research on child nutrition discourse in Nigeria.

Martin and White's Appraisal Framework

James R. Martin and Peter R. R. White (2005) Appraisal theory (AT) is used to analyse the study's data. Grounded in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1994), it explicates how language is used to express evaluation, stance, and interpersonal meaning and explains how people use language to express feelings, make judgments, show opinions and position readers or listeners to agree with them. It is useful for analysing how texts construct opinions and influence readers' interpretations across different contexts such as media discourse, academic writing and daily interactions. AT is organised around three interconnected systems: *Attitude*, *Engagement* and *Graduation*. These systems work harmoniously to show how meaning is not only used to convey information but also to express evaluation and shape social understanding. Attitude refers to the expression of feelings (affect- how does a speaker/writer feel?), evaluate people and their behaviour (judgement- what do you think about a person's character or actions?) and evaluate things, events, ideas and processes (appreciation- what do you think about things and phenomena?). It is concerned with how positive or negative values are encoded in language through emotional responses, ethical judgments and aesthetic or functional evaluations. Engagement deals with how speakers and writers position themselves in relation to other voices and perspectives, indicating whether they present information as certain, disputed or open to alternative standpoints. Graduation deals with the scaling of meaning, showing how language can be intensified or softened to increase or decrease the strength of an evaluation. One of the core arguments of AT is that language is inherently evaluative and rarely neutral. This is an indication that the words people choose usually reflect their opinions, feelings and attitudes, even when they seem to be reporting facts.

Through the interaction of attitude, engagement and graduation, AT demonstrates how language is used not only to represent reality but also to construct interpersonal meanings, influence interpretation and guide how readers and listeners respond to issues. Appraisal resources help writers in Nigerian newspaper reports to express opinions about indigenous African food practices, show agreement, disagreement and perceptions about their use in addressing child malnutrition and strengthen or weaken claims about their effectiveness. This makes the theory relevant for showing how newspapers shape readers' understanding of indigenous dietary practices and child nutrition issues in Nigeria.

Methodological approach

This study adopts a qualitative design and examines Nigerian newspaper reports from *The Nation* and *Punch* (chosen for their wide circulation and public engagement). The data comprise five reports on child malnutrition in Nigeria, three from *The Nation* and two from *Punch*, from which eight ‘texts’ were analysed. The reports were purposively selected from the newspapers’ online archives through searches conducted between August 2025 and February 2026. The selected period reflected heightened public and policy attention to child malnutrition, as IPC and UNICEF assessments reported an estimated 6.4 million children under five experiencing acute malnutrition and approximately 3 million projected to suffer severe wasting (<https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1159808/>; <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/nigeria>). The reports were analysed manually using Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal framework, with attention to affect, judgement, appreciation, engagement and graduation. Since the study used publicly available reports and involved no direct human participants, ethical risks were limited. The newspapers were appropriately acknowledged and the reports were represented accurately in accordance with institutional guidelines.

Presentation of Analysis

In this section, the selected data are analysed in line with the aim and objectives of the study. The discussion focuses on the key themes in the reports and the appraisal resources used to construct these themes, identifying the functions these resources perform. The reports considered here treat child malnutrition as one that is closely connected to indigenous African food practices and their potential role in addressing the crisis. Four main themes are identified. They are:

The Severity of Child Malnutrition

The Challenges of Addressing Child Malnutrition

The Nutritional and Cultural Value of Indigenous Food

Indigenous Food as Solutions to Child Malnutrition

1. The Severity of Child Malnutrition

In the newspapers, text producers examine the severity of malnutrition in children through emphasis on its effects to show that it is urgently expected to be curbed and prevented.

Text 1

At first glance, seven-month-old Adamu looks like any other infant, swaddled and lying quietly on a narrow hospital bed inside the Federal Medical Centre, Kumo. But beneath that calm exterior, he is fighting for his life. Weighing just 2.9 kilograms, Adamu is battling severe acute malnutrition. His mother, Aisha Gambo, sits beside him, her eyes fixed on him with a mixture of fear and helplessness. She recalls that he was born healthy, but his decline began suddenly at four months. "We clocked seven months recently, and he was all fine until he fell ill. We were referred to Kumo from Kaltungo, and they put him on a special diet. We are trying our best to ensure his well-being, but it's a pity that we have not been getting it right," she said. Cases like Adamu's remain tragically common in Gombe State, where malnutrition continues to cut short the lives of children under five. (Dec 14, 2025 The Nation).

The report in text 1 represents child malnutrition as a severe health issue that poses a real threat to the lives of children. This is achieved through the description of Adamu's appearance, his mother's reactions to it and the general prevalence of this situation in Gombe State. The resources of Affect, Judgement, Appreciation, and Graduation are effectively used to identify child malnutrition as a very serious problem. The report starts with the description of Adamu as a child "swaddled and lying quietly" on the hospital bed. This creates an image of a sick child. Adamu's malnutrition is visualised as the cause of the struggle for his life. The phrase "fighting for his life" appeals to the affective aspect of the problem. The reader automatically feels that the child is threatened by some severe danger and the need for help. In addition, the report uses the resource of Appreciation to convey information about the child's weight: "he weighs just 2.9 kilograms at seven months". The word "just" is an appraisal indicating the critical nature of the situation. The seven-month-old infant is much lighter than the typical weight of a healthy child of the same age. This weight is not enough to maintain basic life activities. Thus, it is one of the Graduation resources that indicate the seriousness of the problem. The report says that Adamu has "severe acute malnutrition." The adjective

“severe” once again refers to the Graduation appraisal tool, highlighting malnutrition as a serious condition. According to the problem formulation, the child’s condition is not only unhealthy but also severe and requires urgent attention.

The report also appeals to the Affect appraisal component to demonstrate how devastating the consequences of malnutrition are for the family. The mother who is taking care of the child describes her feelings as “a mixture of fear and helplessness”. These two emotions belong to the Affect element. Moreover, the expression, “it’s a pity” appeals to the Affect resource since it conveys the mother’s disappointment. She is frustrated by the fact that nothing is going well regarding her son’s health. At the same time, the report refers to the Judgement element, as observed in the woman’s submission, “we have not been getting it right.” The mother’s words mean that the family is not capable of achieving the desired result in Adamu’s treatment. The whole situation is viewed as too difficult: severe child malnutrition is complicated and families do not have enough opportunity to deal with it. The report on child malnutrition describes a serious social problem that has already had devastating consequences for many children in Gombe State. The report states, “Cases like Adamu’s remain tragically common in Gombe State”. The expression “like Adamu” makes it clear that the situation in Gombe concerns not only one child but many. The report uses these resources to show the reader the actuality and negativity of child malnutrition. Thus, all the appraisal resources in the report serve two major functions: raising awareness about the problem and evoking a sense of urgency and compassion in the reader.

Text 2

Almost 40 per cent of our children have stunted growth. Sometimes it starts from the womb. “If the mother is malnourished, doesn’t have enough protein or calories, the child will be small for age, will have a higher chance of dying early, will not do well in school, and as the World Bank mentioned, the early childhood years are the most important, because by the time you are five or ten, it is too late. “You can expand in size, but the brain is already developed,” Pate said (February 17, 2026, Punch).

The extent of child malnutrition is immediately quantified through the expression “Almost 40 per cent of our children have stunted growth.” This

is a clear instance of Graduation, as the numerical figure measures the proportion of children affected. A figure close to 40 per cent indicates that stunted growth affects a considerable number of children. The noun phrase “our children” gives the issue a collective dimension, presenting child malnutrition as a concern that affects the wider Nigerian population. The noun phrase “stunted growth” shows the physical effect of inadequate nutrition on children. It points to impaired growth and development, indicating that the problem transcends temporary hunger. The significance of the “almost 40 per cent” figure therefore lies in the number of children whose physical development may already be affected by malnutrition. The consequences associated with maternal malnutrition are expressed through the sequence “will be small for age, will have a higher chance of dying early, will not do well in school.” In other words, the repeated modal auxiliary verb “will” presents these outcomes as likely consequences of poor maternal nutrition. The sequence moves from physical growth to survival and then to educational performance. This progression shows the effect of malnutrition on children's lives. The lexical item “higher” in “a higher chance of dying early” also functions as a resource of Graduation because it indicates an increased level of risk. The phrase “dying early” introduces the most severe consequence of malnutrition, linking poor nutrition with child mortality while reference to death gives greater weight to the earlier claim that almost 40 per cent of children have stunted growth, since the problem is associated with risks that transcend physical development.

Moreover, the expression “will not do well in school” extends the consequences of malnutrition into education. It suggests that poor nutrition can affect children's ability to perform academically as they grow older. The report therefore presents malnutrition as a problem with consequences that may continue into later stages of childhood. The use of “the most important” in the description of the “early childhood years” is another instance of Graduation by the writer in the text. It places early childhood at the highest level of importance and supports the argument that nutritional care during this period is crucial. This is reinforced by “by the time you are five or ten, it is too late.” With the use of “too late”, the writer conveys a strong sense of limited opportunity for intervention. It is an inference that some consequences of early malnutrition may become difficult to reverse as children grow older. The contrast introduced by the coordinating conjunction, “but” in “You can expand in size, but the brain

is already developed” draws attention to the difference between later physical growth and earlier brain development. The use of “already developed” also indicates that changes in physical size at a later stage may not fully address the effects of nutritional deprivation during early childhood. This strengthens the view that the outcome of child malnutrition may extend beyond visible physical growth.

2. The Challenges of Addressing Child Malnutrition

The reports also draw attention to the challenges involved in addressing child malnutrition in Nigeria. The reports reveal that efforts to improve child nutrition are affected by a range of difficulties that limit effective intervention and make the problem persistent. The appraisal resources used in the reports help to convey the difficulties surrounding the prevention and management of child malnutrition.

Text 3

Nutritionists have cautioned parents against relying solely on instant noodles to feed their children, warning that the popular meal lacks the essential nutrients required for proper growth and development. They explained that while noodles may provide quick energy, they fall short in supplying protein, vitamins, and minerals necessary for a healthy diet. The experts noted that the increasing dependence on noodles as quick-fix meals for children without other essentials is contributing to rising cases of malnutrition and weak immunity in children (September 16, 2025 Punch)

In text 3, the warning is attributed to “nutritionists”, who “have cautioned parents against relying solely on instant noodles to feed their children.” This is an exemplification of Engagement, as the report incorporates the expert opinion of those who are knowledgeable about the subject matter. The report gives credibility to the assessment of the child-feeding practice by using nutritionists as the source of the warning. The verb ‘cautioned’ is noteworthy because it implies concern and an invitation to reconsider the practice. With this in mind, the report introduces the issue through the expert lens, with the challenge being the parent-child feeding practice. The warning is related to the expression, “relying solely on instant noodles”, with ‘solely’ being a marker of Graduation. The nutritionists are concerned with the extent to which parents allow their children to rely on a single

type of food. The issue revolves around the practice of relying on one type of meal when a more balanced diet is required. The nutritionists explain that the noodles “lack the essential nutrients required for proper growth and development.” The verb ‘lack’ creates a clear appraisal of the shortcomings of the children’s diet. Likewise, the phrase ‘essential nutrients’ appraises the missing elements as indispensable to the children’s welfare.

This is another manifestation of Appreciation, as the report evaluates the dietary insufficiency in terms of the child’s growth and development needs. The report goes on to note that “while noodles may provide quick energy, they fall short in supplying protein, vitamins, and minerals necessary for a healthy diet.” The conjunction ‘while’ serves to qualify the suggestion that noodles should not be completely eliminated from the children’s diet. Indeed, the report recognises the benefit of the carbohydrate-rich meal as a provider of quick energy. The phrase “fall short”, however, appraises the nutritional profile of the noodles as inadequate in terms of other nutrients necessary for a balanced diet. The tension in the recommendation is captured in the juxtaposition of the positive and negative attributes of the noodles. While the carbohydrates in the noodles can contribute to a balanced diet, the report serves as a warning that the diet may not be wholesome enough for the children’s growth. The adjective ‘increasing’ in the phrase “increasing dependence on noodles” marks another manifestation of Graduation. As a matter of fact, the concern is activated by the fact that the unhealthy practice is gaining popularity. The report shows that addressing the malnutrition problem requires considering the child’s general diet, noting that “without other essentials, such as vegetables and protein-rich foods, children face an increased risk of malnutrition.”

3. The Nutritional and Cultural Value of Indigenous Food

In the reports, food is presented as more than something placed on a child's plate. Indigenous foods carry nutritional benefits that can support children's growth, while also preserving knowledge, practices and traditions passed across generations. The reports therefore draw attention to the value of foods rooted in local communities, presenting them as resources that can contribute to improved child nutrition while keeping important aspects of Nigeria's food culture alive.

Text 4

“Parents should also explore local foods that are indigenous and affordable. Combining them in meals can ensure that children get all the nutrients they need,” Afolabi said. Highlighting practical solutions, he encouraged backyard farming as a cost-saving approach to improving family nutrition. “Backyard farming is also very important. Even from kitchen waste, families can grow vegetables, tomatoes, peppers, sweet potatoes, or beans. By producing some foods at home, families can save money to buy essential protein sources. So, the strategy is to combine affordable local foods, grow what you can, and ensure that children’s diets contain variety and balance,” he said. (Punch, September 16, 2025)

The report in text 4 uses Engagement through Afolabi's expert voice to present indigenous foods as a practical resource for preventing child malnutrition. His advice that families should “look inwards” and “explore local foods” directs attention to food resources that are already available within local communities. The statement that combining these foods can ensure that children “get all the nutrients they need” gives a clear nutritional evaluation of indigenous foods. It shows that when different local foods are eaten together, they can provide children with a range of nutrients required for healthy growth. The expert’s voice therefore supports the argument that indigenous foods can play an active role in meeting children's nutritional needs. The Appreciation element in “indigenous and affordable” also highlights two important qualities of these foods. Their indigenous nature points to their availability within local food systems, while “affordable” draws attention to their economic value. This is important in addressing child malnutrition because families with limited financial resources may find it difficult to provide expensive food options.

The suggestion of “backyard farming” adds a practical dimension to this value. Families are encouraged to grow vegetables, tomatoes, peppers, sweet potatoes and beans at home, making nutritious food more accessible and reducing dependence on purchased food. Indigenous food is therefore presented as both a nutritional resource and an economically realistic option for families. The emphasis on “variety and balance” further explains how indigenous foods can help prevent and curb child malnutrition. These terms evaluate a varied diet positively and demonstrate that children's nutritional needs are best met by including

different types of food in their meals. The reference to “essential protein sources” also shows that home grown foods can work alongside other foods to provide a more complete diet. Through Appreciation, the report construct indigenous food as nutritious, affordable and useful for creating balanced meals, while Engagement gives this position authority through the expert's recommendation. The report therefore frames indigenous food as a practical source of nutrition that families can use to improve children's diets and reduce the risk of malnutrition.

Text 5

“Our food is who we are. Every spice, every ingredient tells a story of where we come from,” Nigeria, with its over 250 ethnic groups, boasts a culinary landscape as vast as its linguistic diversity. Each region has its own dishes, flavours, and cooking techniques, shaped by climate, tradition, and history. From the jollof rice wars of the southwest to the tuwo and miyan kuka of the north, food is not just eaten — it’s celebrated. The Niger Delta’s banga soup, the east’s ofe nsala, and the Middle Belt’s yam pottage are all culinary emblems of Nigeria’s pluralism. In many Nigerian households, food plays a central role in social rituals — from naming ceremonies and weddings to festivals and funerals. For instance, kolanut presentation in Igbo culture or the sharing of dates during Ramadan in the north are practices tied closely to food and tradition. In recent years, Nigerian food has begun gaining global recognition, with chefs and influencers pushing dishes onto international menus and screens. Restaurants in London, New York, and Dubai now feature jollof rice, moi moi, and nkwoji. (August 14, 2025. The Nation)

Text 5 celebrates the cultural value of Nigerian indigenous food. The opening assertive statement, “Our food is who we are,” provides the strongest entry point into the cultural value of Nigerian indigenous food. Through Appreciation appraisal element, food is valued as an expression of cultural identity, while the inclusive pronoun “our” creates a sense of shared belonging. The metaphor “Every spice, every ingredient tells a story of where we come from” deepens this evaluation by presenting food as a carrier of history and cultural memory. The repeated use of “every” also gives weight to the idea that cultural meaning is rooted in ordinary food ingredients, not only in formal ceremonies or recognised traditions. This cultural significance becomes more visible in the reference to

Nigeria's "over 250 ethnic groups" and its "culinary landscape" being as diverse as its "linguistic diversity." The comparison constructs indigenous food as a reflection of the country's cultural plurality. The listing of jollof rice, tuwo, miyan kuka, banga soup, ofe nsala and yam pottage gives concrete expression to this diversity, showing that indigenous foods are ingrained in distinct geographical and cultural communities. Through Appreciation, these foods are elevated from everyday meals to "culinary emblems of Nigeria's pluralism." The noun "emblems" is significant because it positions food as a symbol through which cultural identities can be recognised and represented.

The cultural value of these foods is also included in social life. The proposition that food "plays a central role in social rituals" presents it as an important medium through which communities maintain relationships and cultural practices. The examples of kolanut presentation in Igbo culture and the sharing of dates during Ramadan illustrate how particular foods carry meanings that extend beyond nourishment. Food here becomes part of ceremonies, religious observances and communal interaction. The expression "tied closely to food and tradition" reinforces this connection, suggesting that the preservation of indigenous food practices also supports the continuity of cultural knowledge. From a nutritional perspective, however, the text does not provide explicit information about the nutrient content of these foods, so it would be inappropriate to claim specific nutritional benefits that the excerpt itself does not establish. What the passage does show is that indigenous foods remain deeply embedded in local food systems and household practices. The later reference to "jollof rice, moi moi, and nkwobi" appearing on international menus also carries positive Appreciation, presenting Nigerian cuisine as gaining recognition beyond its cultural origins. This growing visibility can strengthen the value attached to indigenous food and create opportunities for their continued consumption, production and preservation. The report therefore establishes a strong cultural foundation for promoting indigenous foods.

4 Indigenous Food as Solutions to Child Malnutrition

Apart from documenting and celebrating the nutritional, cultural and economic value of indigenous food, the newspaper reporters use specific appraisal techniques to examine how indigenous food/ food systems serve as potent and reliable solutions to child malnutrition in Nigeria.

Text 6

Experts and policymakers have called for increased investment in homegrown food systems as key to Africa's sustainable growth and transformation. (November 4, 2025. The Nation)

In text 6, the report depicts homegrown food systems as an important pathway towards addressing wider developmental challenges in Africa, with the expression “key to Africa’s sustainable growth and transformation” carrying strong positive Appreciation. The adjective “sustainable” gives value to food systems that can support development over time, while “key” presents them as an important means of achieving this progress. This evaluation implies that locally produced food systems have the potential to contribute to more lasting nutritional solutions. The emphasis on “increased investment” also points to the need to strengthen local food production instead of depending entirely on external sources. Since the report refers to “homegrown food systems,” it supports the idea that solutions to nutritional problems can be developed through food resources rooted in African communities. The use of Engagement in “Experts and policymakers have called for” gives the proposition greater authority. The report draws on the voices of people with professional and policy influence to support increased investment in local food systems. The verbal element, “called for” also signals a strong recommendation and suggests that greater commitment is needed to realise the potential of these systems. Although the text does not directly mention child malnutrition or specify the nutritional content of particular indigenous foods, its appraisal choices support the broader argument that strengthening local food systems can provide a foundation for addressing nutritional challenges.

Text 7

For Aisha, OFSP became more than a meal; it became the cure she had long prayed for. Another mother in the community, popularly known as Mommy Abubakar, said her child's growth improved dramatically after she introduced OFSP into his diet. Before then, the child appeared weak and lagged behind in weight gain, a worrying sign for a mother already struggling to meet feeding demands. She noticed visible changes after consistency with the orange-fleshed crop. The child became stronger, more active, and healthier than before. (December 14, 2025 Punch)

The experience of “Mommy Abubakar” gives a simple picture of how an indigenous crop can become part of the answer to child malnutrition in text 7. Before orange-fleshed crop (OFSP) was introduced, her child was described as “weak” and “lagged behind in weight gain,” which signals poor physical development. The later description of the child as “stronger, more active, and healthier than before” creates a clear positive Appreciation of the child's improved condition. The progression from weakness to greater strength and activity suggests that incorporating OFSP into the child's diet was associated with noticeable improvement in his quality of life. The mother's account also brings Engagement into the report by presenting her direct observation of the child's change. Her experience gives a practical dimension to the value of OFSP, showing how a food grown within the local environment can be used in the home to support a child's nutritional needs. The emphasis on “consistency” reveals that regular inclusion of the crop in the child's diet was important to the improvement observed. In this sense, the report represents indigenous food practice as a simple, locally available approach through which families can strengthen children's diets and respond to malnutrition.

Interpretation of Findings

The analysis of the NNRs depicts four dominant issues: the severity of child malnutrition, the challenges of addressing it, the nutritional and cultural value of indigenous food, and its potential as a solution to child malnutrition, examined through Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal theory. Affect, Engagement, Appreciation, Judgement and Graduation reveal how text producers express views on the prevalence, consequences, prevention and treatment of the condition. Graduation indexes the physical and medical effects of malnutrition on affected children, supporting Suchana et al.'s (2026) claim that malnutrition drastically affects growth and development, while Graduation and Appreciation present indigenous food practices and systems as viable means of combating and treating the condition, upholding Aworh's (2023) position that indigenous plants possess healing power. Appreciation also evaluates indigenous foods and food systems positively in relation to their nutritional, cultural, economic, medical and practical value, while negative evaluations portray malnutrition as a serious and troubling condition. The reports therefore advocate the urgent adoption of indigenous food systems as sustainable, accessible, culturally rooted and affordable resources that can support

nutrition interventions, reduce child malnutrition, preserve cultural heritage and strengthen local economies.

Engagement incorporates the voices of experts, nutritionists, mothers and community members, lending authority and credibility to claims about malnutrition, indigenous foods and possible solutions. This demonstrates that the media plays an active role in addressing children's rights and welfare, precisely child malnutrition in Nigeria, as observed by Graziose et al. (2017), and contradicts scholarly notions that issues of child welfare and health are underreported. Affect expresses fear, helplessness, relief and concern, revealing the emotional consequences of malnutrition for victims, their families and the wider community. Judgement evaluates the actions of government leaders, policymakers and parents, exposing poor leadership and inadequate responses, and showing that the problem may remain unaddressed without proper implementation, governmental support and human effort. Finally, the findings confirm that the media does not use neutral language but strategically selects lexical choices to present particular versions of issues, attract readers' attention, influence opinions and mobilise actions around child malnutrition.

Conclusion

The study offers a unique perspective to the understanding of child malnutrition, a social surge whose impact is felt in various regions across the world, including Nigeria. It examines it from an area rarely explored by researchers that is linguistics. It has provided insights and improved the understanding of child malnutrition in Nigeria using the Appraisal tools introduced by Martin and White (2005). Through these tools, readers are either informed or reminded that child malnutrition, not only exist but is associated by consequences capable of drastically impeding the victims' growth and that of the society. Hence, there is need for urgent and adequate intervention from the government, non-governmental organisations, philanthropists and even international communities. The reports show that it becomes imperative to adopt the indigenous/local food and food systems considering not only their nutritional and cultural value but their medical and economic benefits. While this research is centred on appraisal analysis, it is recommended that linguists offer extensive knowledge and perspectives on topics relating to child malnutrition addressing it from

other linguistic domains such as pragmatics, stylistics and corpus linguistics. In addition, attempting an intellectual enquiry of some of these indigenous food and food systems that can solve the problem of child malnutrition from the multimodal lens could expand the knowledge of the masses on their usefulness and probably their safety precautions.

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