The issue of nutrition labeling has been a pressing concern, not only in the nutrition community but in government, industry and amongst consumers. The question of consumer awareness and use of nutrition labels on processed products, both Back-of-Pack (BOP) and Front-of-Pack (FOP) labels, has been frequently raised. The food industry in the Philippines has recently received new regulations from government on FOP labeling, while the health and nutrition community has been considering FOPs that serve broader objectives. The seminar, “Nutrition Labeling: What You Need to Know”, held in Manila on November 28, 2013, had the objective of discussing the recent developments in nutrition labeling both in processed products and food service in the Philippines, as well as future trends and directions (including harmonization) in the area of nutrition labeling. The seminar, organized by the ILSI SEAR Philippine Country Committee, was attended by 60 participants from government, academia and the food industry.

Dr. Mario V. Capanzana, Director of the Food and Nutrition Institute, after pointing out the importance of food and nutrition labeling, discussed the various information given by food labels and the current practice of nutrition labeling in various countries including the Philippines. Dr. Capanzana went on to describe the results of the 2008 National Nutrition Survey regarding consumer’s use of nutrition information on processed products. It appears that only 35% of respondents read the product label, and of these, only 46% read only the expiry date and nutrition facts. The survey showed clearly that the practice of reading product labels follows the socio-economic level of the respondents, with the higher the economic and educational level, the higher is the practice of reading the product label. Finally, Dr. Capanzana discussed the current initiatives on nutrition labeling in the Philippines by the FDA, food industry, and the nutrition community, particularly on FOP labeling.

Prof. Maria Theresa Talavera of the Institute of Human Nutrition and Food, UPLB, described the results of their study on consumers’ preferences on nutrition label formats. Face-to-face interviews were conducted among 65 randomly selected mothers. Results showed that 35.5% of respondents chose price as the basis for buying food, 24% chose taste, 19% chose nutrient content, and 14% chose safety. Fifty-six per cent claimed they read nutrition labels “sometimes” or “quite often”. The price of the product topped the list of information read (73%), followed by brand name, vitamin and mineral content, and expiration date, and to some extent, caloric and salt content, and nutrition claims. Having no time was cited as the reason for not reading nutrition labels by 31% of the respondents, 16-18% cited not being aware of nutrition labeling or considered it not important. About 68% of the respondents preferred the nutrition label to remain at the BOP. Four formats were presented to the respondents from which they chose their preferences: simple traffic light (healthier choice, OK choice, less healthy choice); extended traffic light (eat plenty, eat often, eat in moderation, eat less often, and eat sparingly); multiple traffic light (fat, salt, sugar, and saturates); and a logo indicating that the food product is healthy. About 47% preferred the healthy logo, 32%, the multiple traffic light, 11%, the simple traffic light, and 10% preferred
the extended traffic light. Those with the highest income preferred the healthy logo, although statistically the preference for the healthy logo was not influenced by educational attainment. Most respondents (89%) preferred mandatory nutrition labeling as against voluntary. Prof. Talavera recommended exploring the merits and system of using FOP labeling as it has shown positive results in other countries.

Dr. Maria Victoria Pinion, of the Food and Drug Administration and Chair of the National Codex Organization-Technical Committee, gave an overview of nutrition labeling in SEA Region and regional regulatory update. All countries in the region except Thailand follows Codex regulations in their nutrition labeling (energy, protein, carbohydrate, fat and total sugars), and of these, only Malaysia makes nutrition labeling mandatory. Thailand follows US regulations to some extent. Nutrition labeling in the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore is voluntary except when fortified or when nutrition claim is made. In the Philippines FOP is voluntary (calories), while in Thailand, FOP is mandatory for 5 snack foods. Prof. Talavera next discussed the benefits and challenges of nutrition labeling among consumers, industry, and government. Among the challenges she cited, cost is the primary consideration, including cost for monitoring and surveillance and cost of educating the consumers. Finally, Dr. Pinion discussed harmonization as the current concern among SEA countries, particularly whether voluntary or mandatory, which nutrients to be included, what NRV to be used, type or form of food to be included, and the standard format like design, color, etc., to adopt.

Asst. Prof. Clarissa B. Juanico, of the Institute of Human Nutrition and Food, UPLB, summarized their study on nutrition labeling in canteen menus. The objective of the study was to determine whether consumers would actually use the menu label to guide them in their food selection, and how they are going to change their orders. Interviews were conducted among 130 mostly young and middle age adults (average age, 31 yrs), mostly of college level of education, and employed. The baseline survey showed that 58% of the respondents were not aware of their energy requirement, and 26% do not read food labels. They were then shown different breakfast menus labeled with their caloric content. The results showed that while 92% of the respondents noticed the menu labels, only 63% used the information. There was, however, a weak correlation between those who noticed the menu labels and those who used the menu labels in their choices, implying that the menu labels did not strongly affect their food choice. Of those who used the menu labels, 78% ordered a lower calorie dish, and 10% ordered a higher calorie dish. Finally, the odds of using menu labels was higher among young adults with college level of education and who perceived themselves to be overweight/obese or hypertensive.

The last speaker was Ms. Edith A. de Leon, President of the Philippine Food Chamber, discussed the Philippine food industry perspective in nutrition labeling. After reviewing the findings of the FNRI nutrition survey on food and nutrition labeling, she cited some of the reasons why consumers do not read food labels, among them: brand loyalty, lack of time, price driven, not sure about accuracy of information, too technical, confusing, and the print is very small. On the other hand, she pointed out some reasons why consumers read food labels: “as part of a healthy lifestyle”, “to see what nutrients are in the food”, “concerned about children’s diet”, and “I am on a weight loss/special diet”. Ms. de Leon noted the double burden of malnutrition as a point to consider in nutrition labeling. She then discussed the industry commitments to WHO, among which are: product reformulation, consumer education, raising awareness on balanced diet and physical activity, and actively supporting public-private partnerships. Ms. de Leon next discussed the policies of the food industry on nutrition labeling: science- based, simple, and useful to consumers. She then described some of the GDA (Guideline of Daily Amounts) systems being used around the world together with their strong qualities. Finally, Ms. de Leon summarized some of the pending issues on nutrition labeling including reference values for nutrients associated with NCDs, and the RDA to use in case of harmonization in SEA. She concluded with some options to explore, such as
voluntary FOP labeling based on percentage of GDAs and a multi-stakeholder approach in providing consistent nutrition labeling education programs. She emphasized the importance of partnership, particularly in research on consumer habits and use of nutrition labels, and in nutrition education campaigns.

The Open Forum that followed centered around the need to be clear on the objective of nutrition labeling and FOP labels based on national policy, the use of RENI (Recommended Energy and Nutrient Intake) for Filipinos which is being revised presently, the need to define Daily Value and GDA, and the terms used such as energy vs calories and sodium vs salt. The seminar ended with a summary of the next steps to take to arrive at a consumer-friendly and useful nutrition label in the Philippines.