SUMMARY REPORT

8th Seminar on
Nutrition Labeling, Claims and Communication Strategies
November 26-27, 2013
Hotel Borobudur, Jakarta

Nutrition labels, as well as nutrition and health claims, are important tools to communicate the nutritional quality and health benefits of a food product to consumers. They provide point-of-sale information to help consumers make informed choices. In Southeast Asia, there is wide disparity between label formats and permitted claims between countries, causing confusion among consumers and resulting in trade barriers for food manufacturers and distributors.

As part of a series of seminars on nutrition labeling and claims organized by the International Life Sciences Institute Southeast Asia Region (ILSI SEA Region), this 1½-day seminar provided an update on international and regional developments in nutrition labelling, nutrition and health claims and related issues in Southeast Asia and other regions. The seminar also discussed the use of Front-of-pack (FOP) signposting schemes in the region, as well as identifying opportunities and challenges related to use of nutrition labeling and claims in communicating nutrition and health related messages. Opportunities for harmonization of nutrition labelling and claims in Southeast Asia were explored.

The seminar, held in Jakarta, Indonesia, was co-organized by the National Agency of Drug and Food Control (BPOM), Indonesia, and attended by regulators from ASEAN countries, along with key nutrition academics, and food industry regulatory and nutrition personnel. Mrs. Tetty Helfery Shombing, Director of Food Product Standardization, BPOM, gave the opening and welcome address while Mrs Boon Yee Yeong, Executive Director of ILSI Southeast Asia Region, provided a brief overview of ILSI Southeast Asia Region’s long involvement in the area of nutrition labeling and claims in Southeast Asia in addition to welcoming the speakers and delegates.

Session 1: Nutrition Labeling and Claims - Regulatory Updates and Future Direction

The first session provided an update on developments in nutrition labeling, nutrition and health claims in 8 ASEAN countries, as well as in Australia/New Zealand, China and Taiwan. Ms. Nooruyu Razak, Ministry of Health, Brunei Darussalam, commenced the session, noting that the heavy reliance on imported foods in Brunei poses a significant challenge for food legislation including nutrition labeling. Foods in Brunei are permitted to carry nutrition claims providing they have a nutrition information panel. However, nutrition claims on the presence of vitamins/minerals, including ‘source of’ and ‘enriched with’ are only permitted if the reference quantity of the food contains a certain percentage of the daily allowance for that vitamin/mineral. Ms. Nooruyu noted that in future, regulations will be reviewed in line with international standards and requirements, and that enforcement surrounding nutrition labeling regulations will be strengthened.

Mrs. Tetty Helfery Shombing, BPOM, reported that a nutrition information panel is mandatory for fortified foods and foods carrying a nutrition/health claim in Indonesia, and voluntary for all other foods. Nutrient function claims, other function claims and reduction of disease risk claims are permitted in Indonesia for a number of
nutrients/food components, as declared by BPOM, more recently including glycemic index claims. Mrs. Tetty advised that new claims may be proposed to BPOM, providing they are consistent with national nutrition policies, are truthful and non-misleading and do not encourage excessive consumption of any food. Claims are prohibited on foods intended for infants and claims should not imply that a nutrient or other food component can prevent, treat or cure a disease. BPOM has established the ‘Guidelines for Inclusion of Nutrition Facts on Food Labels’ in 2011, as a reference for industry and other stakeholders.

In Malaysia, labelling of the 4 core nutrients, namely energy, carbohydrate (including total sugars), protein and fat has been mandatory since 2005, reported Ms. Nurul Hidayati Mohd Nasir, Ministry of Health, Malaysia. Recent developments in nutrition labelling in Malaysia include a proposal for a required additional declaration of nutrition information as a percentage of the Nutrient Reference Value (NRV) per serving on the Nutrition Information Panel. In addition, a few amendments have been made to nutrient content claims for gluten and omega-3, and to other function claims for Inulin and D-Ribose. Ms. Hidayati also noted that the list of approved nutrient function claims in Malaysia has been increasing, with a total of 52 permitted nutrient and other function claims currently permitted.

Dr. Sabei Htet Htet Htoo, Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Myanmar, provided a brief introduction to nutrition labelling regulation in Myanmar, including the establishment of the FDA in 1995 and the enactment of the ‘National Food Law’ in 1997, which aims to enable the public to consume safe and quality food, and to supervise and control the production, import, export, storage, distribution and sale of food systematically. Dr. Sabei noted that directive orders related to food labelling are underway, and will be based on the Codex Alimentarius food labeling guidelines. With all sectors of Myanmar opening up recently, the main challenge for the FDA is to deal with food safety measures on imported and exported foods.

The FDA Philippines adopted the Codex Guidelines on the use of Health and Nutrition Claims in 2007, to be used in addition to existing national laws on labeling. Ms. Helena Alcaraz, FDA Philippines, shared that a revision of labeling guidelines is currently underway to make nutrition labeling mandatory. Front-of-pack labeling is relatively new in the Philippines and is being implemented on a voluntary basis. At present, only energy value (as a percentage of RDA or RENI) is being declared on front-of-pack, however Ms. Alcaraz advised that this will soon be expanded to include sugar, sodium and fat. The FDA has issued an advisory for consumers on the use of front-of-pack labeling for making healthy dietary choices.

Ms. Yi Ling Tan, Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority, Singapore, outlined the ‘Singapore Food Regulations’ which specify labeling requirements of pre-packaged food products sold in Singapore. Nutrition labeling is only required when nutrition claims, vitamin and mineral claims or permitted health claims are made. In 2009, an Advisory Committee on Evaluation of Health Claims was formed, tasked with developing a framework and principles for evaluation of health claims in Singapore, based on Codex recommendations for the scientific basis for health claims. As of April, 2009, 5 health claims were approved for use in Singapore. In addition, the Health Promotion Board, Singapore has established the ‘Healthier Choice Symbol’ – a criteria-based front-of-pack logo scheme. Ms. Tan went on to discuss more recent developments in nutrition labeling in Singapore, including a proactive review of nutrient function claims currently allowed in 2 or more major developed countries, and the approval of an additional 3 health claims (for Vitamin A, Magnesium and Phosphorus) in October, 2013.
Thailand follows the 1998 Ministry of Public Health Notification No. 182 ‘Nutrition Labeling’ for nutrient content claims, comparative claims and nutrient function claims, reported Dr. Tipvon Parinyasiri, Thai FDA. More recently, in line with the Ministry of Public Health’s policy to reduce consumption of sugary, salty and fatty foods, Dr. Tipvon indicated that mandatory nutrition and GDA labeling of all snack foods, chocolate products, bakery products, instant foods and chilled and frozen ready-to-eat meals will come into force. The ‘Ministry of Public Health Notification on Health Claims’ is currently in the process of being drafted and will be based on the relevant Codex nutrition labeling guidelines. However, in response to increasing application for claims related to prebiotics and probiotics from the food industry, the Thai FDA established the ‘Guidelines and Criteria for Evaluation of Health Efficacy to Health, Safety and Health Claims of Probiotic/Prebiotic in Food Products’ in 2008, which resulted in the ‘Ministerial Notification Regarding the Use of Probiotic in Food Products’ in 2011, permitting certain claims. Dr. Tipvon noted that future developments in Thailand include the extension of nutrient function claims; updating the Thai RDI for sodium to 2000mg; adding a trans-fat declaration to nutrition labels, and adding allergen labeling such as the presence of nuts and shellfish.

Ms. Truong Thuy Ngoc, Vietnam Food Administration, shared that nutrition labeling is mandatory for functional foods, food supplements, fortified foods and food for children aged 0 - 24 months. In addition, foods that claim the presence of added micronutrients must provide a comparison to the Recommended Nutrient Intakes for that nutrient. Ms. Truong cited many challenges faced in implementing nutrition labeling in Vietnam including the difficulty in calculating the nutrient content of each product due to limitations in laboratory conditions, difficulty in monitoring the use of nutrition labeling and low consumer understanding of nutrition labeling. Currently nutrition labeling in Vietnam is voluntary, referring to the Food Safety Law of Vietnam, the Codex guidelines on nutrition labeling, and nutrition labeling regulations from other countries. Ms. Truong noted that in future a Draft Circular, to be issued in 2014, with detailed guidance on food labeling will signal a move towards mandatory nutrition labeling for pre-packaged foods in Vietnam.

A new standard for nutrition content and health claims has been recently incorporated into the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code and has become law. Ms. Jenny Hazelton, Food Standards Australia New Zealand, outlined Standard 1.2.7 – Nutrition, Health and Related Claims, for which food industry has until January 2016 to meet the requirements set. The standard sets out the regulatory requirements for nutrition content claims, and for the first time permits general level and high level health claims where there is a demonstrated food-health relationship. Ms. Hazelton noted that these claims are only permitted on foods that meet the ‘Nutrient Profiling Scoring Criterion’ (NPSC), a nutrient profiling system based on both risk-reducing (protein, dietary fibre, fruit/vegetable content) and risk-increasing (energy, salt, sugar, saturated fat) components. This is in order to prevent claims from appearing on foods that are high in saturated fat, salt or sugar.

Dr. Junhua Han, China National Center for Food Safety Risk Assessment, gave an update on nutrition labeling in China. After the implementation of the Food Safety Law of China in 2009, the National Food Safety Standard was developed, and as part of this work, food labeling standards were revised and drafted. The new ‘General Standard for the Nutrition Labeling of Pre-packaged Foods’ was issued in 2011 and came into force in January 2013, with mandatory labeling required on all pre-packaged food for energy, protein, carbohydrate, fat and sodium content. The standard also regulates nutrition claims or nutrient function claims, following Codex guidelines for nutrition labeling, and regulations from other countries. Dr. Han also shared a consumer education campaign – the ‘National Education Action of Nutrition Labeling 2012-2015’ that is currently being implemented in China,
including cartoons in schools, posters in supermarkets and essay competitions in newspapers. She noted that the future focus in China would be to educate and improve compliance of smaller food companies, and to evaluate the effect of nutrition labeling on consumer food purchasing behaviour.

Dr. Min Su Tzeng, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan, informed participants that voluntary nutrition labeling commenced in 1998 in Taiwan, becoming mandatory in 2002 for products making nutrition claims. In 2008, nutrition labeling became mandatory for all products except for fresh foods, mineral water, tea, salt and condiments. The Taiwanese government surveyed consumers prior to the enactment of nutrition labeling regulations, to gauge their understanding and format preferences, and they continue to monitor compliance. Dr. Tzeng shared that future developments in Taiwan, expected to be in place by 2015, include the addition of trans-fat and simple sugars to the nutrition information panel, the expression of each nutrient as a percentage of Daily Value (DV), and the development of reference serving sizes for 18 food categories.

Session 2: Use of Front-of-Pack Labels - Recent Developments

The second session of the seminar discussed the use of Front-of-Pack signposting schemes, both internationally and in Southeast Asia. Ms. Kelly Wohlgenant, RTI International, USA, presented results of a systematic literature review conducted by her organization that looked at consumer, producer and retailer response to front-of-pack and on-shelf nutrition labeling systems from countries such as the US, Australia, New Zealand and several European countries. Results of the review indicated that consumers can more easily interpret and select healthier food products with nutrient-specific front-of-pack nutrition labels that incorporate text and symbolic colour to indicate nutrient levels, rather than nutrition labels that emphasize numeric information. Ms. Wohlgenant noted that more research is needed to determine the effects of front-of-pack nutrition labeling on consumer purchase behaviour and dietary intakes especially in Southeast Asia where such information is lacking.

The Healthier Choice Symbol (HCS), a front-of-pack labeling scheme developed by the Health Promotion Board (HPB) Singapore, was presented by Ms. Eunice Pang, HPB Singapore. The HCS is a voluntary criteria-based logo scheme, with products that carry the HCS containing lower levels of total fat, saturated fat, sodium and sugar as compared to similar products in their category. In addition, some products carrying the HCS may have higher dietary fiber, calcium and wholegrain content compared to similar products within the same food category. Ms. Pang noted that the Health Promotion Board uses the HCS to incentivize the food industry to develop healthier products, with around 80% of consumers reporting using the HCS as a guide when purchasing food products. She added that around 300 food manufacturers now use the HCS on almost 2900 products sold in Singapore.

Dr. Tipvon Parinyasiri, Thai FDA, further presented the findings of a recent survey conducted in Thailand on the consumer understanding and utilization of front-of-pack GDA labeling. In collaboration with the private sector and academia, the Thai FDA have spent considerable effort in training food manufacturers in the correct format of GDAs as well as training consumers in the use of GDAs for making appropriate dietary choices. Dr. Tipvon shared information on national education and public awareness campaigns that were launched. Survey results showed that the percentage of consumers that could recognize GDAs was 52%, understand GDAs was 62% and utilize GDAs was 51%. The Thai FDA continues to conduct campaigns to increase public awareness of GDAs.
Session 3: Use of Nutrition Labeling for the Communication of Nutrition and Public Health Messages

Session 3 of the seminar identified opportunities and challenges related to the use of nutrition labeling and claims in communicating nutrition and health-related messages. The session commenced with a presentation by Dr. Hernani Djariir on behalf of Dr. Ekowati Rahajeng, Ministry of Health (MOH) Indonesia, on the use of nutrition labels and claims as educational tools. Following the World Health Organization’s recommendations for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases, the MOH are focusing on improving community awareness and behavior toward healthy diet as one of the public health intervention approaches for NCD control in Indonesia. As part of this approach, the MOH recently released a regulation on food labelling which includes a ‘health message’ on sugar, salt, and fat intake, which is mandatory for all processed food and drink as well as fast food. The health message states ‘Consumption of Sugar more than 50 grams, Sodium more than 2000 milligram, or total Fat more than 67 gram per person per day increases risk for hypertension, stroke, diabetes and heart attack’. Dr. Djariir stated that providing such information on processed and fast foods is expected to improve community behaviour towards healthy diet to prevent NCD and its risk factors as well as to enable the community to make healthier choices.

Dr. E-Siong Tee, Nutrition Society of Malaysia, presented various educational campaigns developed and implemented by the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, including through Nutrition Month Malaysia, to educate Malaysians on the use of nutrition labeling in making healthy food choices. The various activities involve multiple channels including leaflets, websites, magazine and newspaper articles, and the development of guidebooks for parents of toddlers and school children. Dr. Tee acknowledged the challenges in finding innovative ways to ensure nutrition labeling and claims are understood and utilized by consumers, and emphasised the need to target education campaigns towards children.

The private sector has an important role in promoting the understanding of nutrition labeling, noted Dr. Pichet Itkor, presenting on behalf of the Food Processing Club, Federation of Thai Industries (FTI). The FTI has supported the Thai food authorities by responding quickly to nutrition labeling requirements, and collaborating with the Thai FDA on the training of manufacturers on the use of GDA labels, and roadshows to raise consumer awareness of GDA labeling.

Session 4: Harmonization Opportunities in ASEAN

The final session of the seminar explored opportunities for harmonization of nutrition labeling and claims in Southeast Asia. Dr. E-Siong Tee, ILSI Southeast Asia Region, noted that there are currently no uniform requirements for nutrition labeling and health claims in Southeast Asia, based on findings from a series of seminars and workshops on nutrition labeling and claims organised by ILSI SEA Region. Findings show that the main areas of differences include the core nutrients that must be declared; different ways of expressing nutrient content against a set of reference values, which may be optional or mandatory; and different expression format of nutrient content, i.e. per 100g, per serving, percentage of RDA. There are also significant variations in the nutrition and health claims permitted and the required criteria in each of the countries. The regulatory system in place in countries in the region differs and are at various stages of development. Dr. Tee noted that if greater economic integration is to occur with the creation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015, elimination of technical barriers to trade through harmonization of national food regulations and standards is vital. He urged
that greater efforts be made by countries in the region to harmonise several basic aspects of the nutrition labeling and claims regulations, based on the Codex Alimentarius established standards.

Ms. Pauline Chan, ILSI Southeast Asia Region, then gave an overview of the ‘Regulatory Framework for Evaluation of Claims’ and ‘Guidelines for the Scientific Substantiation of Nutrition and Health Claims for Food with Claims’, key outcomes of a series of workshops and expert consultations with regulators, researchers and food industry personnel, organized by ILSI Southeast Asia Region over the past 12 years. The regulatory framework includes establishing a national expert committee on nutrition and health claims; making provisions for nutrition/health claims in existing food regulations; making preliminary preparations such as criteria for substantiation of claims; and establishing a work procedure for reviewing applications. The guidelines were developed based on Codex guidelines, PASSCLAIM criteria, and discussion outcomes from expert consultations and workshops, and include the types of studies required for substantiation of claims, biomarkers used, research design and methodology, overall evaluation of submitted data and re-evaluation.

Mr. Adhi Lukman, Indonesian Food and Beverages Association, completed the session with the industry perspective on opportunities for harmonization of nutrition labeling in ASEAN. Mr. Lukman cited disparity in nutrition labeling requirements between countries as a major barrier to trade of food products, noting four key areas including variance in mandatory versus voluntary requirements; differing minimum and maximum levels for vitamins and minerals; variance in tolerance levels for nutrients; and varied daily reference values for nutrients. Industry is optimistic, despite these variances, about the possibility to explore harmonizing nutrition labeling and claims in ASEAN.

The 8th Seminar on Nutrition Labeling, Claims and Communication Strategies concluded with a panel discussion chaired by Dr. E-Siong Tee, comprising Mrs. Tetty Helfery, Ms. Helena Alcaraz, and Dr Pichetas Panel Members. The panel discussion featured a more in-depth response on opportunities for harmonization in ASEAN and a Q & A platform for the audience on further aspects of nutrition labelling with the panelists.

Mrs. Boon Yee Yeong, Executive Director, ILSI Southeast Asia Region, in her closing remarks thanked the country representatives and invited speakers in joining this important regional seminar to share the latest updates on nutrition labelling and claims regulations from their respective countries. She expressed that the sharing and exchange of the relevant information have contributed significantly towards better understanding of the process undertaken by the countries in establishing their nutrition labelling and claims regulations. Mrs Yeong further extended her gratitude to the co-organizer, BPOM Indonesia, in the support and in co-hosting of the event, and finally, to all attendees in their participation in ensuring the success of this 8th edition of the seminar series.