Summary Report

9th Seminar on Nutrition Labeling, Claims and Communication Strategies
August 4-5, 2015, Crowne Plaza Manila Galleria, Manila, Philippines

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 among countries, causing confusion among consumers and resulting in trade barriers for food manufacturers and distributors.

The 9th Seminar on Nutrition Labeling, Claims and Communication Strategies, organized by the International Life Sciences Institute Southeast Asia Region (ILSI SEA Region) and the ILSI SEA Region Philippine Country Committee, provided an update on developments and regulatory changes in nutrition labeling, nutrition and health claims, and related issues in Southeast Asia and other regions. The seminar also discussed the use of nutrition information panel (NIP), front-of-pack (FOP), and claims as communication tools and how they can be used to influence consumer behavior. The seminar also addressed scientific substantiation of claims, as well as the challenges and efforts in harmonizing nutrition labeling in the ASEAN region.

The 1½-day seminar, held in Manila, Philippines on August 4-5, 2015, was co-organized by the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI) in collaboration with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Philippines. It was attended by more than 200 regulatory, food, and nutrition specialists from the industry, government, and academia. Dr. Maria Victoria D. Pinion, Director of the Center for Food Regulation and Research, FDA, Philippines, and Dr. Mario Capanzana, Director of FNRI, Philippines, gave the welcome address while Mrs. Boon Yee Yeong, Executive Director, ILSI SEA Region, Singapore, provided an overview of ILSI SEA Region’s long involvement in the area of nutrition labeling and claims in Southeast Asia.

Session 1: Nutrition Labeling and Claims: Regulatory Updates

The first session provided an update on developments in nutrition labeling and nutrition and health claims in the region. Dr. E-Siong Tee, ILSI SEA Region, Malaysia, and Mr. Hiroaki Haman, ILSI Japan co-chaired the session.

Ms. Siti Maemunah, National Agency of Drug and Food Control (BPOM), Indonesia, presented the updates on nutrient and health claims, as well the glycemic index claims allowed in Indonesia. She noted that nutrition labeling in Indonesia is mandatory for fortified food, or food with nutrition and/or health claims, but voluntary for other foods. Indonesia also regulates three types of claims: (i) nutrition claims consisting of nutrient content claims and nutrient comparative claims; (ii) health
claims consisting of nutrient function claims, other functional claims, and reduction of disease risk claims; and (iii) glycemic index claims. She advised that new claims may be proposed to BPOM, which will be reviewed by a group of experts consisting of representatives from relevant agencies.

Dr. Khamseng Philavong, Ministry of Health, Lao PDR, shared the relevant laws, regulations, and standards related to nutrition labeling in Lao PDR, including the National Nutrition Policy and Food Safety Policy among others. She highlighted that nutrition claims are not yet common in the country and there are no laws, regulations, and standards related to nutrition claims.

An overview of the law governing nutrition labeling and claims in Malaysia based on Codex guidelines was provided by Ms. Norrani binti Eksan, Ministry of Health, Malaysia. It was gazetted in 2003 and enforced in 2005. Malaysia adopts a “positive list” approach in regulating nutrient function and other function claims. Currently, the permitted list includes 23 classical nutrients such as protein, vitamins and minerals, and 29 other food components such as lutein, plant sterol, and DHA. She then shared the proposed amendments currently waiting to be approved officially which include: (i) requiring Nutrient Reference Value (NRV), expressed as a percentage per serving, to be declared on the nutrition label, (ii) expanding the NRV list to be in line with Codex guidelines, (iii) inclusion of the definition of “Other Function Claim” and claims related to the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines, (iv) adding conditions for nutrient content claims for omega-3 and gluten, (v) allowing a “reduced gluten” claim, (vi) adding function claims for new components—D-ribose, CaHMB, beta palmitin, and galactooligosaccharide (GOS), (vii) revising the minimum amount required for inulin and plant sterols, and (viii) amending the requirement for claims such as “enriched”, “fortified”, “contain”, and “added” from the current condition of meeting 5% of NRV to the respective minimum levels set in their regulations.

Dr. Hnin Nandar Kyaw, FDA, Myanmar, highlighted their National Food Law (1997), which contains provisions for food labeling but not specific to nutrition labeling. She noted that there are plans to modernize the current food law in line with international practices. In fact, a stakeholder workshop was held in February 2015, where experts from related ministries and government organizations participated to help draft the new food law. They also plan to include nutrition labeling as part of food labeling in the future.

Ms. Helena Alcaraz, FDA, Philippines, shared that nutrition labeling has been mandatory in the Philippines since October 2014. The nutrition facts must be presented in a table and must now include calories, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, dietary fiber, sugar, and protein. Local research has shown the effectiveness of FOP labeling in catching the attention of consumers compared to the regular nutrition facts displayed at the back of the package. Currently, only the amount of product per serving, the energy expressed in kcal, and the corresponding % recommended energy and nutrient intakes (RENI), are displayed in the FOP label. The Department of Health is therefore proposing for FOP labeling for sodium and sugar to be implemented because of increasing non-communicable disease (NCD) among the population.

Ms. Mui Lee Neo, Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA), Singapore provided an overview of the types of claims allowed in Singapore and the recent developments in claims regulations. She shared that two relevant guidance materials to help stakeholders make appropriate use of claims are now available in AVA’s website: the “Vitamins and Nutrients Calculator” and a guide for the application of new health claims. Since 2009, 6 out of 28 applications have been approved. AVA has also initiated a
a proactive review of nutrient function claims since the last quarter of 2014, where along with the Advisory Committee on Evaluation of Health Claims, they have reviewed 95 claims for nutrients that have a long history of their physiological role in growth, development and normal functions of the body. The final list of approved new claims is expected to be published on AVA’s website by the end of 2015. In addition, Ms. Neo provided updates on the recent amendments in the Singapore Food Regulations in 2014 which included the use of plant sterol claims on more types of food and updates in the labeling requirements. Finally, she shared that AVA will continue to develop clearer guidance documents and tools for stakeholders, as well as gather feedback from consumers on what else they can do to help consumers access healthier food options.

Regulations in Thailand aim to address NCDs and are therefore focused on reducing consumption of sugar, salt, fat, and calories, explained Dr. Tipvon Parinyasiri, FDA, Thailand. Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA) labeling has been mandatory for five groups of snack foods since 2011, and surveys indicate increasing compliance and adoption of mandatory and voluntary GDA labeling, respectively. The Thai FDA hopes to extend mandatory GDA labeling to all types of snack foods, chilled and frozen ready-to-eat meals, and instant foods. Further, they are setting the criteria for the “Healthier Logo”, adopted on a voluntary basis. Thai FDA has yet to set inspection and monitoring systems, as well as to educate the public about the logo. On top of GDA and healthier logo initiatives, surveys have been conducted to assess public opinion on incorporating traffic light labeling. Though initial response has been positive, further assessment is required to evaluate consumer understanding and utilization of the scheme. Finally, nutrition and health claims are to be expanded as there are currently only 29 approved claims. Standards for serving size references, especially for solid foods, as well as adding trans-fat in the nutrition label need to be re-considered.

Mrs. Truong Thuy Ngoc, Vietnam Food Administration (VFA), Vietnam, shared that nutrition labeling is currently mandatory only for milk products for infants and children. She highlighted that there are additional provisions that certain foods have to comply with such as making comparison with the Recommended Nutrient Intakes of the specified micronutrient that has been used to fortify the food. Mrs. Ngoc explained the challenges they face in implementing nutrition labeling in Vietnam, including the difficulty in calculating the nutrient content of products due to technical limitations; difficulty in monitoring products in the market; and low consumer understanding of nutrition labels. Finally, she expressed VFA’s interest in harmonizing with Codex and ASEAN guidelines in the future.

Dr. Toshitaka Masuda, Consumer Affairs Agency (CAA), Japan, shared the recent introduction of mandatory nutrition labeling in Japan, according to the newly promulgated Food Labeling Act of 2013. The Food Labeling Standard under this act came into effect on April 1, 2015, which specifies the mandatory declaration of energy, protein, fat, carbohydrates, and sodium (expressed as salt equivalent) and voluntary declaration of vitamins, minerals, and others for pre-packaged food and food with food additives added, while fresh food are exempted from the mandatory declaration of nutrients. He then discussed the CAA’s considerations in setting a nutrition declaration format, as well as revisions in nutrient comparative claims and non-addition claims according to Codex guidelines.
Session 2: Use of Labeling for Communication of Nutrition and Public Health Messages

The second session, chaired by Dr. Mario Capanzana, FNRI, Philippines, aimed to discuss whether nutrition claims are well-understood and used by consumers, how nutrition labels influence consumers in their purchase decisions, and what information consumers look at in a nutrition label.

**Ms. Hazel Fowler**, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), Australia, discussed the impacts of nutrition and fortification claims on consumer behavior based on the findings of two studies conducted by FSANZ. The first study examined whether the presence of nutrient content claims on low nutritional quality food (e.g. potato chips) affect consumers’ purchase intentions and nutrition attitudes. The results of the study showed that presence of the claim did not affect purchase intention, nutrition attitude, perceived overall benefit to people, and perceived overall health benefits. The second study examined consumer knowledge of and attitude towards voluntary fortification. The results showed that consumers are aware about voluntary fortification in foods and that some consumers seek out some foods for their added vitamins and minerals, though the reasons vary by food type.

The results of the National Nutrition Surveys conducted in 2008 and 2013 in the Philippines were presented by **Dr. Cecilia Cristina Santos-Acuin**, FNRI, Philippines. She noted that females, younger age groups, urban, increasing wealth and education levels were demographic characteristics of consumers who were more likely to read food and nutrition labels. While there was an increase in food label readership from 46 % in 2008 to 57 % in 2013, information read were usually the expiration dates, brands and the ingredients. Dr. Acuin also highlighted that there was a decrease in the number of people who look out for nutrition facts in the label. Nonetheless, among consumers who do read nutrition labels, they first look for the nutrient content, followed by the amount per serving. The survey also showed that nutrition labels influence the label reader’s decision to buy the product, regardless of demographic factors. Dr. Acuin shared that participants of focus group discussions still refer to the “Go, Grow, and Glow” model as their basis for nutrition knowledge and have difficulty incorporating the “Pinggang Pinoy” (similar to the US MyPlate) concept. Hence, food labels might have to employ basic concepts such as “Go, Grow, and Glow” for people to understand them better.

**Atty. Anselmo B. Adriano**, Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), Philippines, discussed the communication strategies of the Philippine government on nutrition labeling. The DTI communicates key messages to the consumers, such as to be informed by always reading the labels; that nutrition labels indicate approved health claims they can trust; and proper nutrition labels can help them choose healthier diets. These messages are communicated through the development of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials. The DTI partners with leading TV and radio networks to air infomercials and gather feedback through social media channels, and is also working on strengthening the capacity and presence of consumer organizations. Finally, Atty. Adriano shared about the awards program “DTI Bagwis Program” which gives recognition to retail establishments that fully comply with Fair Trade Laws, which includes provisions on fair labeling and packaging.

**Ms. Pamela Forshage**, Philippine Chamber of Food Manufacturers, Philippines, provided an industry perspective on nutrition labeling. She emphasized that food businesses are keen to comply with regulation, but frequent updates in nutrition labeling laws pose challenges to the industry’s ability to meet their speed to market deadlines as well as cost considerations in packaging reprints. She then
expressed the industry’s desire for harmonized regional labeling standards to facilitate trade among ASEAN countries. Ms. Forshage highlighted the difficulty in getting consumers to read instructions and brand names on packages, let alone nutritional facts. She also expressed the need for clarity in the guidelines for health claims, because while the industry wants to comply with the regulations, they also want to attract consumers with good marketing. Finally, she suggested that to get consumers to read labels, it has to be in an easy way.

The second session ended with a discussion about the use of online platforms such as Google and YouTube to target the younger generation, in order to address the challenge of getting consumers to know more about the nutrition of pre-packaged foods. However, there is difficulty in regulating claims on online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and emails. The FDA Philippines shared that modern forms of advertising, including online platforms, are regulated by the Advertising Standards Council (ASC) in the Philippines.

**Session 3: Use of NIPs, FOPs and Claims**

The third session, chaired by Dr. Ruby Apilado, FNRI, Philippines, discussed the use of NIPs, FOPs, and claims in the region, as well as its effects.

**Prof. Jian Zhang,** Chinese Center for Diseases Control and Prevention, China, introduced the nutrition labeling laws in China, the “General Rule of Prepackaged Food Nutrition Labeling (GB28050-2011)”, executed since 2013. He highlighted that since the implementation of the labeling law, more than 90% of food samples collected in a survey expressed the nutrient content in the correct format. However, only about 20% of consumers surveyed claimed to understand the meaning of the labels. Most did not know the meaning of NRV% and could not differentiate between per 100 g (or mL) and per serving. He then explained the potential of FOPs in providing nutrition information in a simple way. However, there are numerous challenges to implementing FOP since it is voluntary, not standardized, and can take many forms and logos.

A brief overview of the importance of NIPs and the different FOP systems—fact-based, criteria-based, and evaluative—was given by **Ms. Pauline Chan,** ILSI SEA Region, Singapore. She also provided updates on the status of FOPs in the Southeast Asian region. Singapore and Brunei employ Healthier Choice symbols or logos while Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand use a GDA-type FOP label. In addition, Thailand is developing a “Better Nutrition” symbol, to be displayed together with the GDA-type FOP labels. All FOP labeling is implemented voluntarily in the SEA region except mandatory GDA labeling for 5 categories of snack foods in Thailand. Ms. Chan ended by discussing the factors to consider when developing an effective FOP format that will be acceptable to most stakeholders in SEA.

The third session concluded with a discussion about the difficulty in interpreting FOP labeling such as traffic light. The importance of educating consumers about NIPs and FOPs to increase the effectiveness of health promotion via these methods was raised. ASEAN countries were also encouraged to adopt Codex NRVs as the reference standard for labeling.
The fourth session, chaired by Dr. Rodolfo Florentino, ILSI SEA Region, Philippines, discussed the scientific substantiation and harmonization efforts of nutrition labeling in ASEAN.

Dr. E-Siong Tee, ILSI SEA Region, Malaysia, discussed the process of scientific substantiation of health claims in Southeast Asia. First, he summarized the regulatory status of health claims (other function and disease risk-reduction claims) in Southeast Asian countries and noted the significant differences among these countries. He then compared the regulatory framework for reviewing health claims between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Dr. Tee also gave actual examples of errors and weaknesses in applications for new health claims, including insufficient descriptions and scientific data as well as irrelevant supporting publications. Finally, he highlighted some challenges regarding providing scientific substantiation of new health claims and the role of ILSI SEA Region in facilitating the sharing of knowledge and progress in the area of nutrition labeling and claims.

Mr. Kim Keat Ng, Coca-Cola Far East Limited, Malaysia, shared that there is a need for proper laws and regulations to guide nutrition marketing activities, as well as an urgent need for harmonization efforts to eliminate technical barriers between countries. Though there have been improvements in harmonization efforts since 2002, there are many different terminologies used for reference values (e.g. NRV, RENI and GDA) despite guidelines set by Codex and ASEAN. He further shared that industry will always strive to comply to the regulations, but harmonization will reduce inefficiencies, uncertainty, and cost of the food supply chain. He stressed the need for ASEAN to have common labeling standards, starting with the revision of the 2006 ASEAN Common Principles and Requirements for the Labeling of Prepackaged Food by including step-by-step implementation guidelines that can be followed by the industry and monitored by regulators more easily. Mr. Ng emphasized on the need to have a Mutual Recognition Agreement for all ASEAN countries to move forward together. Finally, he proposed the establishment of an “ASEAN Expert Group on Nutrition and Dietetics” to draft the claim substantiation guidelines.

The seminar concluded with a panel discussion consisting of Ms. Alcaraz, Dr. Tee, Dr. Florentino and Ms. Cecille de la Paz, Promesso Business Solutions, Philippines, on the panel to discuss on the key learnings and challenges in harmonization. A key step to harmonization is to agree on the items to be harmonized, followed by a step-by-step plan for the regulators, scientists, and the industry. One key issue that has been discussed was the use of existing provisions by Codex as a guidance for the harmonization process of nutrition labeling including the format, NRV, expression of values, and mandatory nutrients in the ASEAN region. Challenges faced include the use of the country’s own dietary reference values instead of adopting the Codex NRV values for use in the nutrition labels. In the closing of the panel discussion, one suggestion given by the panel was for ILSI SEA Region to draft a recommendation to assist regulators in areas to be harmonized.