

Chancellor Fernando C. Sanchez, Jr.'s

Keynote Address

Southeast Asian Conference on Ecnutrition

12 November 2015 @ SEARCA Auditorium, College, Laguna

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Salutations

- Dr. Gil C. Saguiguit, Jr., Director of SEARCA
- Dr. Raden G. Piadozo, Dean of the College of Human Ecology- UP Los Baños
- Dr. Normahitta P. Gordoncillo, Director of the Institute of Human Nutrition and Food and Overall Conference Chair
- Heads of various agencies and institutions
- Professors emeriti and academicians
- Distinguished guests
- Ladies and gentlemen, good morning!

Speech Proper

If the saying “you are what you eat” is true, what does the food you eat say about you?

Before, we might have answered this question from an individualistic perspective. That is to say, we were probably only concerned with things like cholesterol or complex carbohydrates or antioxidants. In which case, we were more concerned with our own issues of health and wellness.

Yet the saying “you are what you eat” takes on a whole new meaning in the 21st century. If we consider this question from an econutrition viewpoint, it has less to do with how our food choices impact our body, but how they make an impression on the environment.

So again: If the saying “you are what you eat” is true, what does the food we eat say about us?

You don't have to answer this question right now, as we have the next two days to ponder on and converse about it. And there's no reason for us to not be able to engage in a *healthy* discussion—no pun intended—as we are in the company of brilliant minds in the fields of human nutrition, agriculture, environment, and economics.

In this year's conference, our discussions will center on achieving sustainable diets. We have a full plate ahead of us, with four technical sessions and a panel discussion.

It is fitting that our first technical session deals with translating econutrition knowledge to action. While the proportion of undernourished people in developing regions has been almost halved since 1990, one in nine people in the world today remains undernourished¹. Moreover, two-thirds of the world's hungriest live in Asia, with Southeast Asia most afflicted with malnutrition—281 million people, to be exact². The four talks of this session should shed more light on the issue and how econutrition can make significant contributions to the sustainable development agenda—particularly Sustainable Goal #2: “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.”

¹ United Nations. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/poverty.shtml>

² United Nations. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/hunger/>

The Millennium Villages Project in Africa is one strategy worth paying attention to. We will surely learn a lot from this community-driven approach to sustainable development, and we are pleased to have with us a friend from the Earth Institute, Columbia University to share with us more about this project.

Technical Session 2 focuses on the environmental dimension of eonutrition. It's hard not to get into natural hazards and disasters when tackling food security. Over the 2003-2013 period, natural hazards and disasters in developing regions had immediate repercussions on smallholder farmers, with damages estimated at almost half a trillion US dollars³. Unfortunately, it is the agriculture sector that absorbs around 20 percent of the overall economic impact brought on by these disasters. These statistics underscore the exigency to reduce communities' vulnerability to natural hazards and climate change. Our speakers during this session will emphasize the need for agro-ecosystem resilience-building, particularly through capitalizing on geographic information systems, enhancing sustainable food production, and implementing early warning systems.

³ United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Retrieved from www.fao.org/3/a-i4646e.pdf

Meanwhile, one of the threats to food security and nutrition is postharvest loss. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, almost one-third of food produced—that’s approximately 1.3 billion ton per year—is either lost or wasted along the food chain⁴. Such quality and nutrient losses negatively impact nutrition. On a different note, it is not surprising to note that agriculture is a very hazardous industry, which puts the lives of farmers and other workers at risk in their day-to-day affairs. Precarious conditions expose agricultural workers to work-related injuries, lung disease, noise-induced hearing loss, skin diseases, and cancer⁵. Both these concerns are addressed in technical session 3, which zeroes in on health.

Finally, the fourth technical session tackles the socio-economic dimension of eonutrition. Over the past 15 years, the food sector has been witness to an expansion of corporate social responsibility efforts. In this session, we will find out what it means to “jollify”—Jollibee Group Foundation’s brand of corporate social responsibility. And to make the perfect segue to the panel discussion on promoting sustainable diets in the 21st century, our friend from the University of Georgia, Athens will talk about societal behavioral change for food and nutrition security.

⁴ United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Retrieved from www.un.org/en/zero hunger/pdfs/HLPE_FLW_Report-8_EN.pdf

⁵ Ho Dinh Hai. Retrieved from <http://www.hodinhhai.com/agriculture.html>

Altogether, these inputs would surely pave the way toward crafting an action plan or agenda for econutrition.

At this point, allow me to congratulate the Institute of Human Nutrition and Food or I-H-N-F, College of Human Ecology, UP Los Baños, in collaboration with SEARCA, on mounting this Southeast Asian Conference on Econutrition. This is a very solid team-up, if I may say so. On the one hand, we have IHNF, the University's arm for food and nutrition instruction, research, and extension. It is worthy to mention that, since 1988, BS Nutrition graduates have inked a 100% passing rate in the annual Professional Regulations Commission Licensure Examination for Nutritionist-Dietitian. In fact, this year, UP Los Baños graduates topped the exam.

Sustainable development is the key outcome of UP Los Baños's current Research, Development, and Extension Program. The university espouses an interdisciplinary approach to work toward food and nutrition security and address the challenges of climate change and other current global concerns. One such initiative is establishing the Interdisciplinary Studies Center on Food Security, which seeks to promote food and nutrition security through research, instruction, and extension.

Last year, the Center conducted roundtables to exchange knowledge, identify gaps, and work out the way forward for a more integrative approach to food and nutrition security.

On the other hand, we have SEARCA, SEAMEO's Center of Excellence in Agriculture. The Center recently embarked on its 10th five-year plan focusing on Inclusive and Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development as a pathway to food security and poverty alleviation in Southeast Asia. In line with this overarching strategy, SEARCA has implemented an Umbrella Program on Food and Nutrition Security for Southeast Asia. In fact, UP Los Baños is SEARCA's partner university in the current research project, "Enhancing Human Resource Development in Agriculture: Imperatives for Regional Food and Nutrition Security."

When like-minded institutions join forces in organizing meaningful knowledge sharing events such as this one, you can only imagine big things are in store for you.

I started my keynote address with an oft-repeated quote—“you are what you eat”—and asked what the food we eat says about us. This is actually a trick question. If our concern is sustainability—and, in the context of econutrition, sustainable diets—then we should not turn the spotlight on us.

Sure, the way we consume food in relation to the environment speaks volumes about us. But we really should be more concerned with the impact it makes on the generations to come. What we eat today defines the future. Now that’s something to chew on.

Thank you very much and good morning!