

2024 | Southeast Asia Public Health Nutrition Network

Summary Report

Webinar Series 1/2024 on

Improving Food Environments in Southeast Asia Countries:
Where Are We Heading?

25 September 2024 | Zoom Online Platform



Partner Societies/Associations:

Supported by Educational Grant from:



Food and Nutrition Society of Indonesia



Nutrition Society of Malaysia



Nutrition Foundation of the Philippines, Inc



Nutrition Association of Thailand under the Patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn



Vietnam Nutrition Association



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1. ABOUT SEA-PHN NETWORK

Established on 2nd June 2014, the Network aims for a more effective implementation of public health nutrition measures to improve nutritional wellbeing of populations in the region. The current 5 members of the Network, which are affiliated with the Federation of Asian Nutrition Societies (FANS) and the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS) are Food and Nutrition Society of Indonesia (Pergizi Pangan), Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), Nutrition Foundation of the Philippines, Inc. (NFP), Nutrition Association of Thailand (NAT) and Vietnam Nutrition Association (VINUTAS). More details of the Network are available on the Network website: <http://sea-phn.org>.

2. WEBINAR BACKGROUND

The food environment refers to the physical, economic, political, and socio-cultural context in which consumers engage with the food system to acquire, prepare, and consume food. It is important to recognise that food environments would differ considerably depending on the socio-economic development status of the countries. In Southeast Asia (SEA) countries, the population may obtain their food from modern retail venues (e.g. grocery stores, convenience stores, mini- and supermarkets) where they buy foods to consume or to prepare and eat at home. Large segments of the population also obtain their meals from a huge variety of various traditional food outlets, including hawker stalls/street foods, cafes, restaurants, workplace cafeterias, school canteens, and numerous food delivery services. Having healthier food and meals available and affordable in food retail and food service settings allows people to make healthier food choices. Countries in the region have in place or are enacting regulations to assist people in making healthier choices of packaged foods, e.g. nutrition labelling. However, there is a notable lack of policy, regulations, or measures to urge consumers to make healthier food choices for meals served in the multitude of food outlets. An unhealthy food environment can be a major driver of the growing prevalence of overweight, obesity, and diet-related non-communicable diseases. To curb this trend, it is urgently needed to implement policies, regulations, and interventions to ensure that healthier options become more easily available, accessible, affordable, and desirable in both modern and traditional food environments.

This webinar was organised to:

- Provide a platform for mutual learning and exchange of experiences among SEA countries to understand the current status, policies, and evidence-based measures undertaken to improve food environments in the respective country
- Understand gaps, barriers, lessons learned, and opportunities to address food environment issues
- Explore the potential roles that multisectoral stakeholders can play in improving food environments in SEA countries.

The webinar was attended by 213 participants including nutritionists, dietitians, members of academia, researchers, policy makers, public health workers, nutrition graduates and postgraduate students as well as other healthcare professionals. This report summarises the presentations and discussions during the webinar.

3. WEBINAR PROGRAMME

Webinar Programme

Time	Programme
14:30	Welcome Remarks Dr Tee E Slong, Chairman, SEA-PHN Network
	Session 1: Food Environment Improvement Policies, Regulations & Interventions in Southeast Asia Countries - Country Report Chairperson: Clin Prof Dr Nallnee Chongviriyaphan, SEA-PHN Network
14:45	Indonesia Speaker: Dr Helda Khusun, SEAMEO RECFON
15:10	Vietnam Speaker: Assoc Prof Dr Truong Tuyet Mai, National Institute of Nutrition, Vietnam
15:35	Malaysia Speaker: Dr Teoh Ai Ni, Khazanah Research Institute
16:00	Philippines Speaker: Dr Lella S Africa, University of the Phillipine Los Banos
16:25	Thailand Speaker: Dr Chanchira Phosat, Faculty of Public Health, Mahidol University
16:45	Panel Discussion: Overcoming Barriers to Creating Healthier Food Environments Moderator: Dr Tee E Slong, SEA-PHN Network
18:00	End of webinar

Times indicated are Kuala Lumpur time (GMT +8 hrs)

4. SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS

Welcome Remarks

Dr Tee E Siong, Chairman of SEA-PHN Network, President of Nutrition Society of Malaysia

Dr Tee, Chairman of SEA-PHN Network, welcomed participants to the webinar and introduced the Network's background and key activities in promoting public health nutrition in the SEA region. He then shared the background and objectives of this webinar, focusing on exchanging experience, understanding the current food environments in the SEA countries and discussing ways to improve them in the region. He emphasised that the food environment plays a crucial role in the prevalence of nutritional issues, such as undernutrition and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Understanding where and how families eat is vital to improving nutrition in the region.

It was acknowledged that the culture of eating out is common in the region, with many families facing challenges in preparing nutritious meals at home due to time constraints. This leads to an increased reliance on external food options like hawker stalls, cafes, restaurants and school canteens. However, the lack of healthier food choices - both in home-cooked meals and in dining out food options - complicates efforts for consumers to adhere to healthy eating guidelines. Dr Tee further pointed out a significant regulatory gap in food environments. While there are existing regulations for pre-packaged foods, such as nutrition labelling and claims, there is a notable lack of guidance for meals offered in various food outlets and food delivery services. Despite some successful initiatives, such as Singapore's healthier dining programme and Malaysia's "My Choice" aimed at promoting healthier eating when dining out and empowering the vendors to provide healthier options, these efforts are still limited in scope and reach. The absence of regulation on various food outlets makes it even more challenging for consumers to make informed and healthy choices when dining out. Current dietary guidelines also lack key messages and recommendations on cooking healthier meals at home and choosing healthier options when dining out, with Malaysia's dietary guidelines being the only ones that include such messages.

Dr Tee also noted the critical role of the school food environment, citing the Malaysia School Nutrition Programme (MySNPP) by the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, which aims to provide healthier meals for school children and at the same time enhance their nutrition education using the 'Good Nutrition – Key to Healthy Children' modules developed by the SEA-PHN Network. He called for more comprehensive dietary guidelines and increased support for healthier food choices across the region, highlighting the urgent need for collaborative efforts to improve the overall food environment.

Session 1 – Food Environment Improvement Policies, Regulations & Interventions in Southeast Asia Countries – Country Report

Chairperson: Clin Prof Dr Nalinee Chongviriyaphan, SEA-PHN Network

Presentation 1

Food Environments in Indonesia: Current Status and Future Directions

Dr Helda Khusun, Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Center for Food and Nutrition (RECFON), Indonesia

Dr Helda introduced a framework for understanding the food environment, highlighting dimensions such as food availability, pricing, marketing, regulations, accessibility and desirability. She noted that Indonesia is undergoing a significant nutritional transition, marked by rising rates of overweight and obesity alongside persistent undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, as well as an increasing in non-communicable diseases. Traditional dietary habits among the population are being replaced by non-traditional foods, particularly processed and ready-to-eat options. An analysis from the Indonesian Food Barometer indicated that in urban areas like Jakarta, just over half of meals are eaten at home, with many sourced from outside. Younger, highly educated generations tend to eat out more often, favouring tavern (*warung*) and street food vendors.

Dr Helda then discussed how food choices vary by provinces due to cultural preferences and economic access but are heavily influenced by social and environmental factors. Convenience and cost often drive individuals towards ready-to-eat options. Indonesian adolescents primarily choose foods based on taste, convenience, health concerns, and social influence. Despite some national data on nutritional status and consumption trends, comprehensive data on the food environment, particularly regarding retail settings, is lacking. Sharing case studies on food store choice and purchasing behaviour among urban slum women, she highlighted that the high prevalence of food stores selling unhealthy, affordable options contributes to the consumption of energy-dense foods and obesity rates in the communities. Although the number of modern retail stores is increasing, there is no data on their impact on food consumption, highlighting the need for future research. Other research priorities include standardising methods for assessing food environments and evaluating their impact on nutritional and health outcomes.

In terms of policies, Dr Helda emphasised the need to create a healthier food environment by making healthier choices economically accessible, regulating food marketing, establishing nutrition labelling, and raising consumers awareness. Other proposed measures in Indonesia include a sugar tax to reduce demand for sugary beverages and stricter advertising regulations, especially in schools. She stressed that collaboration among multiple stakeholders is essential for improving the food environment. This involves policy development and enforcement by the government, ethical food marketing by the business sector, social media regulation, research for evidence-based policies, and the role of civil organisations in advocating for healthier choices. She concluded by calling for a broaden focus on sustainability, emphasising the need for a healthier and more equitable food system as a collective priority.

Presentation 2

Food environment improvement policies, regulations and interventions in Vietnam

Assoc Prof Dr Truong Tuyet Mai, National Institute of Nutrition, Vietnam

Assoc Prof Dr Mai shared that there are currently about 300 policy documents addressing the food environment in Vietnam, classified into six domains: food products, nutritional quality, food outlets, marketing, pricing, and accessibility. In food products domain, policies focus on food safety, including laws governing food management and control, as well as strategies and plans for information, education, communication, and training on food safety to ensure safe consumption while promoting food safety awareness. In the nutritional quality domain, efforts are underway to address unhealthy ingredients such as sugar and trans fats, with specific food composition targets established for these ingredients in industrially processed foods. Standards for salt and sugar in school meals have also been established. However, there are no clear targets for sugar content in meals served at educational institutions and other food service outlets.

Dr Mai noted that existing policy do not establish standards to identify healthy versus unhealthy food retailers, and there is no policy to support the development of healthy food retailers, as the current limited support for traditional retail channels does not favour this development. While current policies recommend diverse food options, there is inadequate attention to the availability of healthy food in food outlets. In food marketing, Dr Mai pointed out the lack of regulations on advertising unhealthy foods to children, especially in mass media and online platforms.

In 2023, the Ministry of Health approved guidelines for mandatory nutrition labelling of seven ingredients on pre-packaged foods, but policy to assist consumer in understanding these labels is lacking. Further efforts will be taken to ensure that evidence-informed front-of-pack supplementary nutrition information system, which allow consumers to assess the product's healthiness, is applied to all packaged foods. Efforts have also been made to minimise the taxes on foods to encourage availability and consumption of healthy food choices, such as VAT exemptions for locally produced products, VAT and import tax exemptions for imported fresh fruits, vegetables and meats. However, there are no policies promoting in-store availability of healthy foods, nor any relevant regulations for street foods. Dr Mai highlighted the increasing meat consumption and trend toward eating out, particularly in the urban area. Controlling the diverse street food scene in Vietnam is challenging, particularly the unclear food origin, which poses food safety issues.

Discussing critical areas for food system action, she shared the latest National Action Plan on Food System Transformation in Vietnam, which focuses on access to safe, nutritious food and sustainable consumption. She noted the need for collaboration among multi-stakeholders. In addressing the challenges and opportunities in implementing healthy food environment policies, Dr Mai pointed out the limitation of the Vietnamese food nutritional composition table and the need for expertise in food environment analysis. She concluded with recommendations for continuous policy monitoring and evaluation, interdisciplinary research, ongoing dialogues with multi-stakeholders, and establishing feedback mechanisms.

Presentation 3

The State of Food Environment in Malaysia

Dr Teoh Ai Ni, Khazanah Research Institute, Malaysia

Dr Teoh's presentation provided an overview of Malaysia's food environment, focusing on five key dimensions: food availability, affordability, vendor properties, food messaging, and the overall impact on public health, as along with related policies and initiatives. In terms of food availability, Dr Teoh noted that as Malaysia transitions to an upper middle-income country, its growing reliance on food import for caloric and nutrient supply presents challenges into food environment as the weight of imported ultra-processed, energy-dense and high-fat foods has been increasing. Meanwhile, the supply of fruits and vegetables is insufficient to meet the dietary recommendations, worsening the condition of low consumption among the population and high prevalence of non-communicable diseases. The household consumption patterns have shifted significantly toward eating out, with nearly half of meals sourced from restaurants, cafes and street food vendors, raising concerns about diet quality and health implications. Regarding food affordability, Dr Teoh highlighted that while the cost of a healthy diet is rising, wage stagnation makes it challenging for low-income families to afford healthier options. While fruits, vegetables and animal-sourced foods are more nutritious, these foods are also more expensive, and preparing healthy home-cooked meals incurs additional hidden costs, such as time and energy.

In addition, the properties of food vendors have shifted toward modern retailing, including supermarkets and hypermarkets, which increases access to processed foods. The rise of online food delivery has also contributed to dietary shifts, often promoting unhealthy food options and eating habits, with fast food and sugary drinks consistently top the chart of most popular food ordered. It is also stressed that unhealthy street foods are widely available, with many of these foods reported to be high in sodium, sugar and fat, and lack nutrition labelling, making it challenging for consumers to identify healthier choices. The social media trends further reinforce unhealthy eating habits among the population. Dr Teoh addressed the lack of regulations on food messaging, particularly concerning unhealthy food advertising targeting children and adolescents, which is exacerbated by the rapid spread of digital marketing. She emphasised the need for better regulation of food marketing and advertising practices.

In discussing policy initiatives, she highlighted existing measures such as restrictions on unhealthy food sales in schools, tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, healthier choice logo, healthy cafeteria, and fast food advertising guidelines etc. However, there are limited policies addressing street food vendors, modern food retails, as well as other food outlets. The Food Environment Policy Index shows Malaysia average performance, with weak indicators for unhealthy food promotion in children's settings and food composition targets for out-of-home meals. Several opportunities and gaps identified for food environment research and investigation include food consumption away from home, cost of healthy versus unhealthy foods, hidden cost of healthy home-cooked food, impact of retail modernisation on food choices, influence of online food deliveries and digital food environment.

Dr Teoh concluded with recommendations for a system wide improvement of food environment, emphasising the need to strengthen existing policies to address inequalities in food choices, considering mandatory policies and undertake a more comprehensive package of polices to adequately respond to changes in food environment and consumption patterns.

Presentation 4

The Philippine Food Environment: A Closer Look - Trends, Gaps, and Opportunities for Healthier Choices *Prof Dr Leila S Africa, Institute of Human Nutrition and Food College of Human Ecology, University of the Philippines Los Baños, Philippines*

Dr Leila presented an overview of the Philippines food environment, highlighting historical influences on Filipino eating habits, such as a rich culinary heritage and multiple meals a day. She discussed the current food environment landscape and food sources of the Philippines population, which includes traditional markets, grocery stores, carinderias, hawker stalls, street food, restaurants, fast foods eateries, specialty stores, and modern food delivery services. Other food sources for households include home vegetable gardens, community-supported agriculture, food banks, and community kitchens. The rise and influence of Western fast food chains and processed options, especially in urban areas was noted as a significant concern.

She then moved on to discuss the prevalence of malnutrition in the Philippines, noting that the food environment has something to do with the increasing prevalence of overnutrition across the different life stages. She highlighted trends in processed foods consumption, a growing reliance on food delivery, and limited access to affordable healthy options, along with issues like insufficient nutrition education platform, pervasive marketing of processed and fast-food, and lack of comprehensive food environment policies. Sharing UNICEF's research on children's experiences with the food environment, she highlighted several action points identified to support children access to healthier diets, such as strengthening the Philippine Milk Code to restrict the marketing of breast milk substitute, implementing mandatory legislation on marketing of unhealthy food to children, mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling, and engaging street vendors to sell healthier options. It was acknowledged that while initiatives like school-based feeding, school gardening and nutrition education have been established, their effectiveness remained limited, highlighting the need for integrated policies that include monitoring and evaluation. A desk review of school food environment in the Philippines emphasised the importance of policies on school canteen management, school-based feeding programme, food safety, and nutrition education to promote fruits and vegetables consumption among school children.

Dr Leila then spoke about existing policies, noting that the Philippines Plan of Action for Nutrition serves as the overarching framework with key strategies such as increasing availability, accessibility, and affordability of nutritious food. Key interventions under the action plan include regulation on unhealthy food marketing, sugar-sweetened beverage tax, Nutritional Guidelines for Filipinos, regulation on the labelling of pre-packaged food products and voluntary front of pack labelling. She also shared a draft policy promoting healthy diet, which includes measures to enhance availability, accessibility and affordability of food necessary for a healthy diet, procurement of food using public funds, price and fiscal measures and regulations on marketing of foods high in sodium, sugar and fat.

In closing, Dr Leila stressed the complexity of the Philippine food environment and the need for a multi-faceted approach with evidence-based policies to address gaps and promote healthier choices. She called for collaborative efforts in food environment advocacy, empowering individuals to make informed food choices, and investing in sustainable food systems, behaviour change communication initiatives and research collaborations across Southeast Asia.

Presentation 5

Current Management of Food Environment in Thailand

Dr Chanchira Phosat, Faculty of Public Health, Mahidol University, Thailand

Dr Chanchira started her presentation by discussing the current state of Thailand's food environment. In 2021, Thai households spent about a quarter of their monthly budget on food and beverages. In terms of the consumption pattern, it was acknowledged that most Thai people consume home-cooked meals, followed by restaurant and street foods, with street foods being particularly popular among working individuals aged 25-44 years in central region of Thailand. Food choices of Thai people vary by age and region, with younger people prioritising taste and personal preferences, while older adults and elderly focus more on appetite.

Dr Chanchira highlighted significant nutritional concern, noting that majority of the consumers do not prioritise nutritional value when purchasing foods, which complicates efforts to create a healthier food environment. She noted that popular Thai dishes are often high in sugar, sodium, and fat, while lacking adequate fibre. Case study on food safety of popular street foods in Thailand revealed contamination issues due to poor hygiene practices, and that the nutritional quality of street food is often poor with sodium level exceeding recommended limit, underscoring the need for improvements in both safety and nutritional quality. In addition, the country's food consumption survey indicated that the consumption behaviour tends to be driven by personal preference, with young and middle-aged adults frequently consuming sweetened beverages and seasonings. Although access to fruits and vegetables is relatively high, the average sugar and sodium intake of the Thai population exceeds recommended levels, posing serious public health risks.

In response, Thailand is implementing various mandatory and voluntary policies to enhance the food environment. Mandatory measures include nutrition labelling, front-of-pack labelling, trans fatty acids elimination, sugar tax and advertising guideline aimed at promoting healthier food choices. A tax on high-sodium products is also under consideration. Voluntary initiatives include the use of healthier choice logo on food label, low sugar drink orders promoting low sugar beverage options and workplace healthy canteen project encouraging vendors to offer at least one health-promoting menu item. There is also Thai school lunch programme aims at improving nutrition of school children, with free school lunch provided to the school children. Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Many consumers struggle to understand nutrition labels, and most people do not use front-of-pack label or healthier choice logo as guidance in food purchase. Dr Chanchira remarked that these could be due to low awareness and the belief that healthier options are more expensive. Cultural preferences for traditional diets high in sugar and fat, along with economic constraints faced by food vendors in using healthier ingredients, and inconsistent enforcement of food safety and nutritional standards complicate efforts to improve the food environment.

In closing, Dr Chanchira emphasised the need for fostering a healthier food environment in Thailand through greater public education on the benefits of healthy eating, nutrition education programme in schools and communities, utilisation of technology for monitoring food safety and nutrition, and collaboration with various organisations to enhance resources and expertise for healthy food initiatives.

5. PANEL DISCUSSION – OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO CREATING HEALTHIER FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

Moderator: Dr Tee E Siong, Chair, SEA-PHN Network

The session’s panellists included all speakers, council members of the SEA-PHN Network/representatives from five nutrition societies in Southeast Asian countries, and associate member (corporate partner) of the SEA-PHN Network. The discussion aimed to explore data availability on the food environment in Southeast Asian communities to inform policy implementation, necessary improvements to the food environment, and potential stakeholder collaboration.

Key points from the panel discussion:

- The panel noted a shift in dietary patterns across SEA countries from home-cooked meals to dining out and fast foods, driven by availability, high accessibility, popularity of food delivery services and food marketing, particularly in urban areas.
- There is an urgent need for comprehensive national data on the entire food environment, including food consumption patterns, sources and nutritional quality of foods consumed outside home, their contribution to energy and nutrients intake, and their implications for nutrition and public health. Current data often lack detail, particularly regarding fast food, traditional meals, and street foods. Continued data collection and research are essential to inform public health policies that promote healthier eating habits.
- The rise in street food vendors post-pandemic reflects economic trends, but limited data on street food consumption needs to be addressed to assess its impact on diet and nutritional status.
- Regarding the plan on mapping the overall food environment, the Philippines is involved in the CGIAR’s Fruit and Vegetables for Sustainable Healthy Diets (FRESH) initiative, looking into approach to increase fruit and vegetable intake and improve diet quality. One research project under this initiative involves mapping the decision-making process of communities regarding their choices of where to purchase vegetables.
- Understanding consumer behaviour and preferences, particularly why consumers opt for certain food options is crucial. Education for both consumers and vendors was emphasised as essential for fostering healthier food choices.
- Clear nutritional guidelines for meals consumed outside the home, such as street foods, are necessary, despite the challenges of regulating this diverse food sector due to their high numbers. Consumer awareness and education on healthier choices for these meals and beverages need to be strengthened. It was suggested that the demand for healthier options could be promoted through consumer awareness campaigns. Other potential policy includes labelling initiative for street foods.
- The importance of regulating school canteens to promote healthier food options was highlighted.

- Local agencies should be engaged to enhance local level policies such as food safety aspects and health clearance requirements for street food vendors to improve the food environment as well as to develop win-win interventions that benefits both consumers and food vendors.
- There is a need to assess the availability of fresh versus processed foods, and to develop nutrition profiling for meals across the region. It was acknowledged that profiling of meals consumed outside home would be challenging due to varied preparation methods.
- Mobilising nutritionists and dietitians at the local level to empower the community is important, despite challenges related to consumers demand for quick, cheaper food options.
- The food environment should be viewed holistically, encompassing both processed foods and meals from various outlets, including street foods and online services.
- The complexity of food environments necessitates coordinated efforts across different sectors, including government agencies, food industry representatives, and local communities, to address food environment challenges collectively. Enhancing consumer education, improving access to healthier options, and implementing data-driven policies are critical to improve food environment and dietary habits. The messages of dietary guidelines should also be more effectively shared to reach the population.

6. PICTORIAL REPORT



Figure 1. Dr Tee E Siong, chairman of SEA-PHN Network, delivered the welcome remarks



Figure 2. Clin Prof Dr Nalinee, vice-chairman of SEA-PHN Network, chaired the session 1 of the webinar

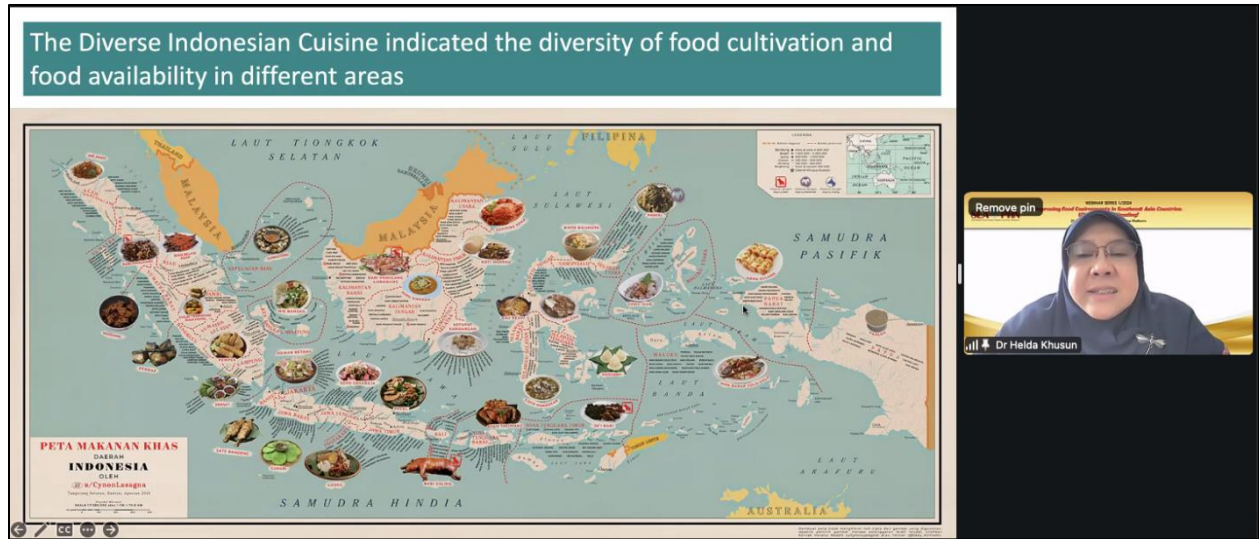


Figure 3. Dr Helda Khusun presented the current status and future directions of food environments in Indonesia

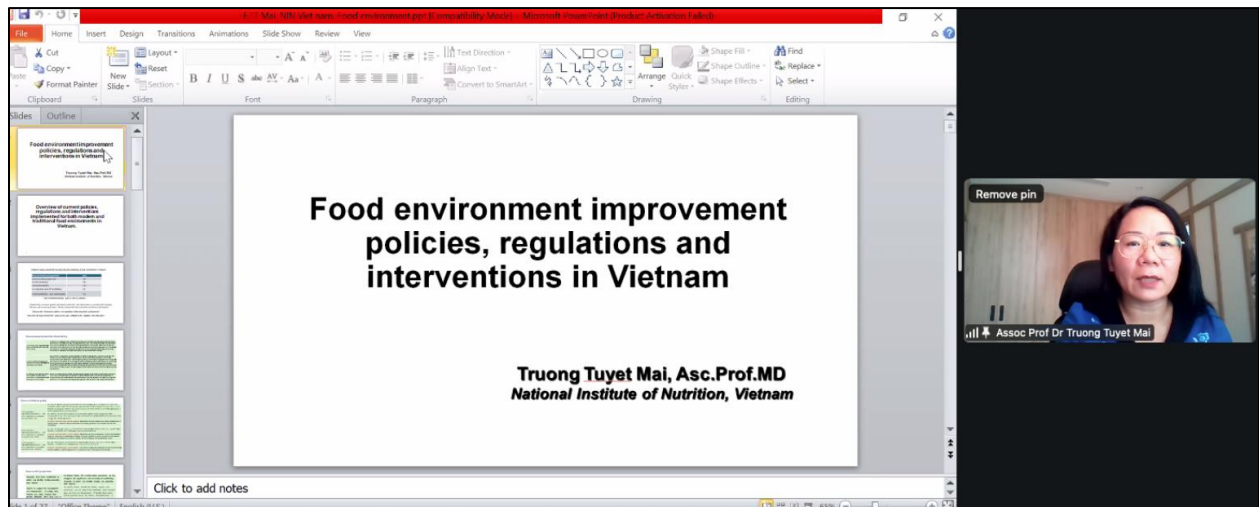


Figure 4. Assoc Prof Dr Trung Tuyet Mai presented the food environment improvement policies, regulations and interventions in Vietnam



Figure 5. Dr Teoh Ai Ni presented the state of food environment in Malaysia

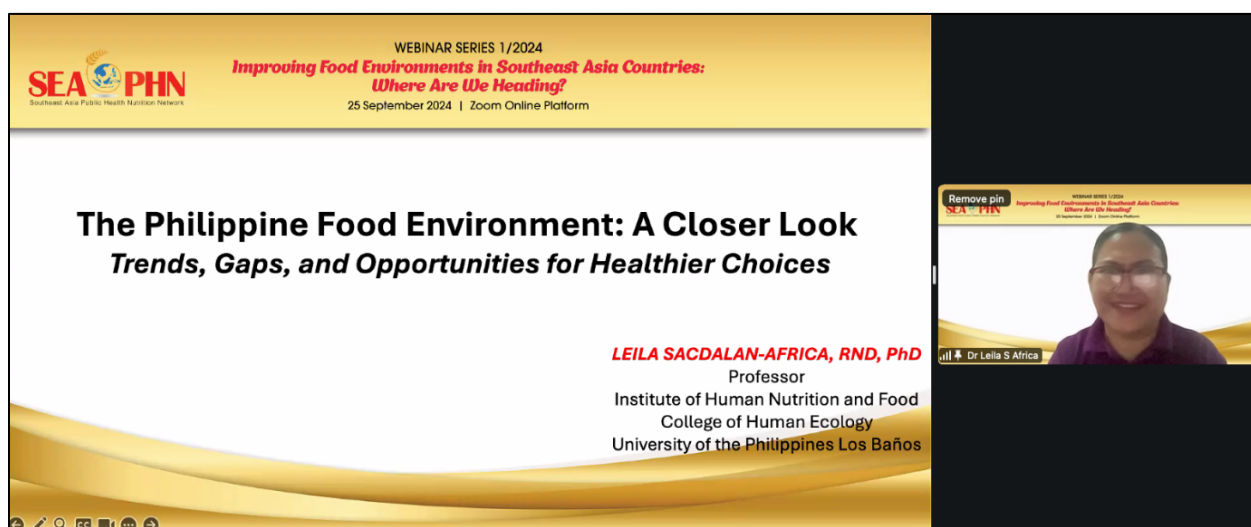


Figure 6. Dr Leila S. Africa presented the Philippine food environment, trends, gaps and opportunities for healthier choices

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Current Management of Food Environment in Thailand

Information provided by
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rewadee Chongsuwat and **Lect. Dr. Chanchira Phosat**
 Nutrition Association of Thailand
Dr. Visaratana Therakomen
 Bureau of Nutrition, Department of Health, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand



Figure 7. Dr Chanchira Phosat presented the current management of food environment in Thailand



Figure 8. Group photos of invited speakers, chairpersons, council and associate members of SEA-PHN Network, guests and the Network secretariat

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The SEA-PHN Network would like to thank the chairs of the Webinar, all speakers for their presentations and sharing their views and thoughts during the panel discussion. The Network acknowledges the educational grant of PepsiCo Services Asia Co. Ltd (Quaker) and Herbalife in enabling this webinar to be carried out. The Network also places on record its appreciation to all participants for attending the webinar. Appreciation is also conveyed to VersaComm Sdn Bhd for serving as secretariat of the SEA-PHN Network and organised the webinar.

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Report vetted and approved by:
Dr Tee E Siong, Chairman of SEA-PHN Network

10 December 2024