

Keynote Speech

The Role of Nutrition in National Development

Soon Cho,
Deputy Prime Minister
and
Minister of Economic Planning
of Republic of Korea

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great privilege for me to deliver the key-note address to the 14th International Congress of Nutrition.

I am especially honored to have this opportunity to speak before such a distinguished group of world-renowned scientists. I will address the role of nutrition in national development from a global perspective.

In general, the concept of national development is understood as the process of positive political, economic, and socio-cultural changes in order to advance problem-solving abilities. With time, the ultimate goal of national development changes. In the past, national development was viewed mainly as enhancing political, military or economic strength. More recently, however, national development is considered by many countries to be the improvement of health and welfare of their citizens in both physical and psychological terms.

Indeed, the act of consuming food should be considered both as consumption and as investment activities in economic viewpoint. For a healthy body and sound mind, consumption of nutrition is the most important and fundamental factor. Also, the intake of proper and balanced nutrition can contribute to economic development by supplying healthy labor to society, thus raising labor productivity and increasing the number of economically active citizens.

Furthermore, good diet reduces national medical expenditures by preventing various diseases caused by unbalance nutrition. Reduced medical costs can be diverted to other national needs.

For these reasons, management of nutrition is one of the most important current issues concerning national development.

We might say that the current situation and problems-which can be categorized into two aspects. The traditional aspect of nutrition management emphasized solving of food deficiencies; that is, the adequate supply of food was considered the principal goal. Many people in less-developed countries still suffer from nutritional deficiencies due to food shortage.

Presently, however, another aspect of nutritional management has emerged. In many developed countries, people suffer from obesity and chronic diseases due to what has come to be known as overnutrition. This new trend demands that greater attention be paid to the management toward balanced nutrition.

Thus, we are confronted with the following two very important tasks in managing nutrition: providing the optimal food intake and attaining a balanced diet.

Until the early 1960s Korea had suffered from typical nutritional problems common to most less-developed countries. Thanks to rapid economic development since the early 1960s, however, Korea has been fortunate enough to solve the problem of undernutrition. Although the problem of food shortage has been largely overcome, a percentage of low-income people still face nutritional deficiencies. In addition, with growing material affluence and consumption, more and more people are suffering from problems related to overnutrition.

Thus, Korea's current nutritional problems involve the existence occurrence of one segment of population that is overnourished and another segment which is undernourished. And the country is faced with the disparity in diet among different socio-economic and geographic groups.

For these reasons; I find the holding of this International Congress of Nutrition in Korea very meaningful.

Now let us look at the relationship between national development and nutritional policy through the experience of Korea. For the purpose of our examination, I will divide recent Korean history into the following 3 stages of nutritional development: (1) 1945 to the early 1960s, which span the difficult period of reconstruction and the Korean War; (2) early 1960s to mid 1970s, when Korea launched and implemented its earlier economic development plans; and (3) mid 1970s to the present, during which Korea has come to be recognized as one of the most dynamic newly industrializing countries.

During the 1st stage between 1945 and the early 1960s the Korean people suffered from a vicious circle of poverty resulting from social disturbances and devastation of Korean War. Nearly devoid of essential natural

resources and accumulated capital, Korea persisted under overcrowded conditions unable to properly feed its people. Although farming comprised the main source of livelihood for the people, there was little capital to invest in agricultural sectors and in improving agricultural productivity.

As a result, many Korean people suffered from problems related to undernutrition. Caloric deficiency, due to shortage of food was particularly common in spring when grains would run out and new crops was yet to be harvested. Although Korea's food policy stressed the production of enough calories for the population, domestic agricultural production was not sufficient to support its people, and large amount of necessary food was supplied by donation from the U.S.

During the second stage of Korea's nutritional history between the early 1960s and the mid 1970s, the government launched the First Five Year Plan in 1962 and subsequent economic development plans-which stressed outward-oriented economic growth. Emphasis was placed on light labor-intensive industries, Korea was able to efficiently utilize its abundant labor for production and exports of these items to foreign consumers.

Simultaneously, the Korean government emphasized agricultural production to solve its nutritional deficiency. Some of the policies undertaken included:dual pricing system for main grains, establishment of agricultural fund for price-stabilization and development of new high-yield seeds by using genetic technology.

Through these policies, programs, and methods, Korea was able to supply more agricultral products and to improve its position on chronic shortages of grains and caloric intakes.

By 1970, the average caloric intake rose to 2,300 kcal per day-surpassing the basic need of 2,100 kcal. Consequently, because caloric intake improved overall, the physical health of children improved greatly;and prevalence of chronic nutritional deficiencies, such an anemia and cheilosis, were drastically reduced. Nevertheless, animal protein and vitamin deficiencies still persisted.

In the third stage extending from the mid 1970s to the present, Korea's annual per capital GNP has drastically increased from 1,000 U.S. dollars to more than 4,000 U.S. dollars. At the same time, the Korean economy has become more intemationalized. Due to significant economic and sociocultural improvements and growth in intemational trade, Korea's undernutrition problems have continued to improve markedly.

The food consumption structure has been changed. The consumption of rice, the major caloric source has decreased while intake of meat, poultry, fruits and vegetables has increased. Because of the import-liberalization of agro-fishery products, foreign foods including tropical items have become available for consumption. Korea's open-market policies have induced the diversification of food items available.

Also tremendous changes in life-style have resulted from increased income, preference to leisure, increase in female employment. Such changes in turn lead to modification in food consumption pattern. One can notice, for example, a rapid growth in demand for processed and fast foods.

As a result, total caloric intake has risen, and in general, nutritional situation has been improved as well. Such improvements, however, has brought about a growing increase in overnourished population and chronic adult diseases such as obesity.

At the same time, undernutrition among low income groups still persists. Furthermore, intake of animal protein remains at a low level while disparity of diet among groups of different socio-economic strata has widened.

Overall, Korea now suffers from both undernutrition and overnutrition. The scope of nutritional problem has been diversified and widened. In the past, it was commonly believed that nutritional problems can be solved through economic growth and sufficient supply of food. As illustrated by Korea's nutritional history, economic growth raises new and unexpected nutritional problems.

Reflecting on Korea's experience, I believe that management of nutrition should be started in the initial stage of economic development. Comprehensive and systematic nutritional policy should be established and implemented in closer connection with other related areas, such as food production, and public health.

In many countries where the national priority has been laid on economic growth, the governmental concern on nutrition can easily be overlooked. As the result, after its economy developes to a certain level, the absence of an adequate nutrition policy becomes an obstacle to national developmet. In Particular, lack of nutrition policy leads to imbalance in diet habits. Such development not only lowers the overall health of citizens, but also leads to disharmony among socio-economic and geographic groups.

Korean government has been trying hard in various ways to solve these nutritional problems. To solve the undernutrition problem, the government gives food free of charge to low-income citizens and supplies nutritious foods through school lunch programs to students from low-income groups. Good nutrition is especially important to the mental, physical and social development of the younger generation. In addition, the government offers nutrition education and guidance to rural farming and fishing communities. The mportance of good nutrition to the groups such as those in hospitals, nursing homes and factory cafeterias

is emphasized. To prevent nutritional imbalance of the public, the government provides recommended nutritional guidelines. Frequent and regular nutrition surveys are made to monitor eating habits.

Even though the Korean government has been trying to improve public health and nutrition, I am afraid that its effort has not been completely systematic and comprehensive. I think that Korea must make a more coordinated effort in solving the nutrition problems. The basic direction of future nutrition policy for Korea is to offer nutritionally balanced foods to the general public at low cost.

To achieve this goal, nutrition policy should be planned and implemented in close relation with agro-fishery policy. Currently, it is difficult for many countries to be completely self-sufficient in agro-fishery supply. Because of limited farmland, Korea, in particular, must balance carefully domestic agricultural production with importation of food from abroad. Thus it is important to decide which crops could be cultivated economically and efficiently, and which agricultural products could be imported. Also, it is necessary to make serious efforts to apply genetic engineering in developing new crops and in producing nutritionally balanced foods.

To prevent nutritional imbalance among socio-economic and geographic groups, public aid should be offered to those groups that are in need. But the greatest emphasis should be to reduce the fundamental income disparity through overall economic progress.

In addition, processing, storage, transportation, food safety and food quality control should be emphasized. False and exaggerated advertisement should be discouraged to prevent the development of wrong diet habits. More precise and comprehensive surveys on nutrition should be made in order to inform the people of current nutritional standards.

Today, the nutrition problems afflict the human race at both home and abroad, in both developed and developing countries. Nutrition is one of the most important factors that determine human welfare as well as national development. Therefore, new discoveries and ideas that you present at this meeting will contribute to the well-being of the people of our planet. As for Korea, proceedings from this congress will serve as good reference in the formation of its future nutrition policies. With your help, I am sure that this conference will indeed be the turning point for the "New era of Global Harmony Through Nutrition."

I sincerely ask you to make a special effort to help solve the world's nutrition problems and to suggest ideas for nutrition management. In this respect, you are taking an essential part in an effort to advance peace and human welfare throughout the world. I wish you great success, and moreover, I hope that the conference will be an opportunity for you, the nutrition experts, to strengthen mutual understanding through close cooperation.

Thank you very much.