

Speech by Deputy Minister of  
Energy, Science, Technology, Environment and Climate Change, Malaysia  
YB ISNARAISSAH MUNIRAH MAJILIS

OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF BREAKTHROUGH EXPERIENCE EVENT  
8 May 2019 at Grand Hyatt Kuala Lumpur

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[Salutation list]

Good afternoon and salam sejahtera.

1. I am pleased to be here today for the launch of the Breakthrough Experience Event organised by NamZ and co-organised by the Bridge Partnership, on the kind invitation of Mr Christoph Langwallner, initiator of the Nutritional Paradox.

OBESITY IN MALAYSIA

2. Malaysia is known the world over for its tourist attractions and warm, multicultural people but the dubious honour of being Asia's fattest country leaves much to be desired - approximately half of the population is overweight or obese.

3. Based on the World Health Organization classification, the prevalence of obesity among Malaysian adults above 18 years was 17.7% in 2015 (National Health & Morbidity Survey [NHMS] 2015) while children below 18 years were reported as 11.9% obese. Obesity among Malaysians had increased by 302% in 2015 compared to 4.4% in 1996 (NHMS 1996), exposing this group to serious, non-communicable diseases or NCDs like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke, gall stones, and some types of cancers.

4. As a result, healthcare costs related to the prevalence of overweight and obesity in Malaysia are the highest in ASEAN, an economic burden that accounts for 10 – 19% of our national healthcare spending.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

5. Besides the prescription of physical exercise for the overweight and obese, Malaysia needs more interventions on food intake such as simple food labelling for informed choices, consumption of foods with low sugar and fat content, and measures that are children-focused, especially among the lower income B40 group and the poor. It is the co-existence of hunger and obesity/overweight, which I believe exists not just in Malaysia, but globally as well.

THE NUTRITIONAL PARADOX

7. Rapid urbanisation has been associated with an increase in energy-dense diets, characterized by high levels of refined sugars, salt, and other additives, increased saturated fat intake, and reduced intakes of complex carbohydrates, fibre, fruits, and vegetables. Increasing the consumption of nutrient-dense foods is one way to break the cycle of under-nutrition and at the same time, obesity. Studies have shown how consuming nutrient-dense foods are associated with a reduction in the risk of overeating and NCDs such as diabetes.

8. The current challenge faced by our nation is for all levels of Malaysians to gain equal access to the consumption of nutrient-dense foods, especially for consumers from lower income households because the cheapest and most accessible foods are commonly calorie-dense, fast and processed foods. Without naming any commercial examples, such foods lead to the prevalence of overweight and obesity previously mentioned.

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9. Attempts have been made to increase crop diversity through “superfoods”, for instance berries, kale, quinoa, and chia seeds which, most of the time, are not scalable in production in developing countries. Superfoods introduce new foods into people’s diets, but it is an elitist approach. They are too expensive to be affordable for the low income groups.

Members of the audience.

10. The Breakthrough Experience Event is timely and relevant as leaders from the research, science, and business fields gather to find solutions and committed action to issues like the production of nutrient-density food and crop diversity; balancing nutritional needs with environmental conservation; and persuading people to choose foods that are better for their health and the environment. Our Ministry looks forward to the outcomes of this 4-day event as I understand NamZ is in the business of developing new technologies, crop diversification, and science that can provide global communities with more efficient and sustainable ways of producing food on existing agricultural land.

#### RELATED MESTECC POLICIES

11. The National Biotechnology Policy (2005 – 2020) under the Ministry of Energy, Science, Technology, Environment and Climate Change focuses on the economic sectors of agriculture, healthcare, and industrial manufacturing, aiming to position the biotechnology sector into one of Malaysia’s key economic drivers by 2020. We certainly welcome new technologies that can enrich the Malaysian diet with nutrient-dense food while providing wider accessibility and affordability to nutritionally-balanced meals. To achieve this objective, we are working in synergy with other partners such as Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry (MOA), Ministry of Water, Land and Natural Resources (KATS) and etc.

Distinguished guests.

12. The United Nations has identified extreme climate variability as a key driver of food insecurity, which contributes to both overweight/obesity and hunger. MESTECC as a custodian of environment and climate change of the country is very much interested and committed in crop diversity that not only yields healthier outcomes but more importantly, uses a fraction of current land and water resources vis-à-vis environment conservation and protection. The effective management of natural resources and the environment, specifically the productive capacity of land, forests, biodiversity, and water, is a key area in the National Policy on the Environment.

#### CLOSING

15. Today, I am privileged to be in the presence of leaders from around the world in government, industry and civil society who dedicate their lives to improving their communities. I understand there will be a full-packed programme culminating in a presentation to key stakeholders on 10 May to hear commitments to the solutions provided.

16. It is wonderful to know that you will be connecting communities by building bridges between political, civil and business leaders in the global battle against obesity and hunger while creating sustainable economies and a healthier planet. May you achieve the objectives that you aimed for.

17. I opened my speech by mentioning about Malaysia's tourism attractions. In closing, I would like to welcome the foreign guests in the audience who are visiting our country for the first time. Please avail yourselves of the hospitality of Kuala Lumpur. I am sure you will find your stay memorable and like others before you, I hope this visit will be the first of many.

18. On that note, it gives me great pleasure to announce the Breakthrough Experience Event officially open.

Thank you.

For Media Enquiries, please contact:

Ms Jade Bourne

Mobile: +65 8508 0070

E-mail: Jade@NamZ.com.sg

NamZ Pte Ltd, #03-13 CleanTech One

1 Cleantech Loop, Singapore 637141

Tel: +65 6334 2730