

Thailand-Philippines partnership in focus at SEARCA's Meet the Diplomat Series launch

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The Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) officially launched its newest knowledge-sharing platform, the **Meet the Diplomats Series (MDS)** at the inaugural session featuring Her Excellency Makawadee Sumitmor, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Thailand to the Republic of the Philippines, as the guest of honor. The event brought together a curated audience of diplomatic officials, government representatives, and specialists from the Los Baños Science Community, academe, and partner institutions to witness the launch of a platform designed to bridge the gap between foreign policy and regional agricultural goals.

In her welcome remarks, SEARCA Center Director Dr. Mercedita Sombilla emphasized that the launch of the MDS strategically aligns with SEARCA's 12th Five-Year Development Plan: **Sustainable Transformation of Agricultural Systems through Innovation in Southeast Asia (SUSTAIN Southeast Asia)**. This strategic plan embodies SEARCA's commitment to transformative regional progress, anchored by the **4Ps framework**: boosting farmer incomes (**Pocket**), enhancing food security (**Plate**), building climate resilience (**Place**), and empowering the next generation of stakeholders (**People**).

Sombilla noted that Thailand's agricultural innovations offer valuable insights for the region, particularly for the Philippines. She also highlighted the 75-year diplomatic relationship between the Philippines and Thailand, adding that this new series would further deepen institutional understanding of how diplomacy and agricultural innovation intersect to ensure regional stability.

"Our bilateral ties—spanning trade, education, tourism, defense, and agriculture—are not merely agreements on paper. They are living partnerships that strengthen ASEAN's collective resilience and prosperity, reminding us that our nations flourish most when we flourish together," she remarked.

Makawadee affirmed the strong partnership between Thailand and the Philippines, noting active collaboration across trade, agriculture, energy, banking, logistics, and tourism during her presentation. She highlighted that Thai companies operating in the Philippines have created over 50,000 jobs and continue to explore opportunities in the agribusiness, digital economy, and green energy sectors. She cited Charoen Pokphand Foods Philippines (CPF) as an example of a long-standing Thai investment that works directly with Filipino farmers through contract farming and technology transfer. As a result, CPF has become the country's leading supplier of pork and shrimp and the third-largest supplier of chicken, with major food companies such as Jollibee sourcing from them.

The envoy also discussed the growing involvement of Thai companies in the coconut industry, noting that two leading firms are establishing large-scale processing facilities in Panabo and Cagayan de Oro in Mindanao, Philippines. Each plant represents an investment of nearly one billion pesos and is expected to begin operations this year. She noted that Mindanao's strong logistics system and high-quality coconut supply make it a strategic hub for export-oriented production.

Makawadee further explained that Thailand's cooperative approach abroad is strengthened through "*Team Thailand Plus*," which brings together government agencies and private sector representatives working overseas. The team in the Philippines, she noted, is one of the largest and most active, with regular coordination among companies and Thai government offices to support bilateral cooperation.

The diplomat also shared insights on Thailand's agricultural development, particularly the long-standing royal projects, such as the Doi Tung Development Project, which have improved rural livelihoods through research, soil and water management, crop diversification, and sustainable enterprise development. She emphasized how government support for smart agriculture; precision technologies; and micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) development has contributed to Thailand's position as a major global food producer.

"The end result is that Filipino farmers will be able to produce their high-quality food, resulting in sustainable growth of the livestock and aquaculture, enabling the country to achieve self-sufficiency and food security," Makawadee noted.

During the open forum, students, faculty, and development practitioners raised questions on MSME competitiveness, access to technology, and the need to support aging farming populations. Makawadee encouraged deeper regional collaboration, emphasizing that shared experiences among Southeast Asian countries can help address common agricultural challenges.

The inaugural session of the MDS culminated in the presentation of a certificate of appreciation to Makawadee, marking a high-impact start for a series positioned to elevate global diplomatic discourse within the regional rural development sector.

Moving forward, the MDS will continue to feature ambassadors who will share country perspectives, foreign policy priorities, development directions, and cooperation opportunities that can inform SEARCA's research, innovation, and capacity development programs. Through this initiative, SEARCA aims to strengthen engagement with the diplomatic community and promote inclusive, innovation-driven agricultural development in Southeast Asia.