Future Earth Asia-Pacific Regional Workshop

21-23 November 2012

Opening Remarks by Yuan Tseh Lee, President of ICSU

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, welcome to the Asia Pacific Regional Workshop for Future Earth. It would be most appropriate for me to begin by thanking those who made this workshop possible.

- The Swedish International Development Agency, or SIDA, which funded this workshop
- The Asia Pacific Network for Global Change Research, or APN.
- Thanks also go to those who did such excellent work to put this workshop together – staff at the ICSU Secretariat in Paris, ICSU's Asia Pacific Regional Office here in Kuala Lumpur, and the Academy of Sciences of Malaysia, which hosts the Regional Office. This has really been a collective effort.

I would also like to thank our partners in the Alliance behind Future Earth, which besides ICSU also includes the International Social Science Council, the Belmont Forum of research funding governments, and UN bodies such as UNESCO, UNEP, UNU, and the WMO. As you can all see, there is really a strong group of actors gathered around Future Earth.

And I think what unites all of us around this exciting initiative is in part the awareness that the pace of global change as well as the scale of our sustainability challenges is truly enormous. We have too many people consuming too much, and this is doing huge damage to our living environment and ecosystems. In the face of this unprecedented crisis, business as usual is just not good enough anymore. **Business as usual is not an option anymore.**

This is perhaps more true in the Asia-Pacific than anywhere else. This region holds around 70% of the world's population and some of the fastest growing economies in the world. Its rate of urbanization is faster than the global average. The disparity between rich and poor is enormous. And Asia-Pacific also represents a huge portion of the world's carbon emissions – different estimates put it at more than 40% of global emissions. What this means is that the Asia-Pacific region has the potential to decide the fate of human sustainability. If it continues with business as usual and follows the Western way of development, this region has the power to keep human development unsustainable. The good news, however, is that the Asia-Pacific also has the vitality and creativity to blaze a new sustainable path for the world. It's fully capable of kick-starting transformations that put humanity on a pathway to sustainability.

But for this to happen, it is absolutely vital that the science and research community step up to support this sustainability transition. **And this is exactly what Future Earth is about – it's science stepping up to the responsibility to help humanity transition to sustainability.**

Now, before I go on to talk about Future Earth and its vision for a different kind of sustainability research going forward, we have to look back and acknowledge that Future Earth comes from a long history of remarkable success by a large and dedicated community of global environmental change research. Globally this is headlined by the four GEC programmes – the WCRP, IGBP, IHDP and Diversitas – together with the ESSP. But this community has also done really excellent work here in the Asia-Pacific, especially by the

APN and for instance the Monsoon Asia Integrated Study, or MAIRS. Indeed, Future Earth is only possible because of the incredible work these bodies and individuals have put in.

Yet at the same time, most of us also recognize that to meet the global sustainability challenges at hand, science and research also has to evolve. And Future Earth has a vision for what a new way of doing global sustainability research.

First, we must dramatically scale up our research and capacity building efforts. This will involve greater investment from a wider range of sources. So it's extremely encouraging to have SIDA here, intimately involved. I am sure that this great example will be followed by other countries.

Second, this research has to be more integrative than ever before. It is true that science must build on the strengths of individual core disciplines, and always will. But when the challenges we face are interconnected across multiple fields and domains, it means we have to bring together different disciplines and knowledge systems in order to solve the problems. Interconnected problems demand interconnected solutions.

Third, a new way of doing research means effectively connecting knowledge to solutions and actions. The research itself has to be solutions-oriented, targeting the most pressing issues facing human societies, such as the interconnected challenges of energy, water and food. Research also has to provide useful knowledge for decision-makers to take effective action. And this means that the best way to go is for research to be designed and done together with those who use the knowledge, from policy-makers to businesses to communities and development agencies. We call this the "co-design and co-production" of knowledge. It requires involving the users and stakeholders from start to finish, from agenda-setting all the way to dissemination and application.

So this is the vision that Future Earth has. This is a new way of doing research and connecting the knowledge to solutions and actions that will help human societies get on a pathway to global sustainability.

One of the most important aspects of Future Earth I have not mentioned yet is the regional component. We definitely recognize the fact that most decision-makers and users of knowledge are actually at regional and local levels. If Future Earth does not engage them and bring value to the actors at these levels, then it will most likely fail. Therefore, the regional component is extremely important for Future Earth.

That's also why we cannot overstate how important this workshop is. The input you provide over these next three days will be extremely valuable for defining how Future Earth can be relevant for the Asia-Pacific region. How can Future Earth and its research agenda help Asia Pacific address its biggest needs and challenges? And also, how can knowledge and resources in the Asia-Pacific be brought back to the global level?

So we are here to discuss together. This is the beginning of a process of continuous engagement.

I truly believe that where the Asia-Pacific region goes from here will heavily shape the future of humanity. We know that it cannot copy the Western way of development and way of life. If it does, the environmental consequences will be catastrophic. We know this for a fact. Asia-Pacific needs to find a different path to sustainable prosperity.

And we are both confident and hopeful that Future Earth can help. By developing a new way of doing research and connecting the knowledge to effective solutions and actions, Future Earth can help bring about key transformations that will get our societies on a path towards sustainability.

It's an ambitious vision, but one which we are very optimistic about. I look forward to three days of very rich and provocative discussions with all of you.

Thank you