Opening Statement  
by  
H.E. Mr. Don Pramudwinai,  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand,  
at the Seventy-Fourth Session of the United Nations  
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)  
on 14 May 2018, United Nations Conference Center, Bangkok.

1. Good morning to you all. On behalf of Thailand, allow me to share with you this very auspicious day, the Royal Ploughing Ceremony Day, which is very important for our farmers and for us all here in Thailand. Before I begin, allow me to join the President of the General Assembly in extending condolences to Indonesia for the loss of lives through the act of terrorism, and as a member of ASEAN, we certainly stand with Indonesia in solidarity.

Mr. President of the General Assembly,  
Madam Chair,  
Madam Executive Secretary,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  

2. We are honoured by the presence of all distinguished delegates and, especially, having the President of the General Assembly here with us today. We also appreciate Secretary General Guterres’s video message. And of course, we thank our Executive Secretary and we are sorry to learn that you are leaving us so soon. You have enjoyed the trust of the host country. Certainly, our appreciation also goes to your team for hosting the 74th session of the Commission.

Ladies and Gentlemen,  

3. While echoing the point made by the President of the General Assembly on Asia and the Pacific as the world’s fastest growing region, with 40% of global output and 35% of global imports, we have to admit that there remains those left behind and excluded from the benefits of economic growth and development. For so long, we have been preoccupied by GDP figures and statistics, but not the quality of life itself. We have been focusing on income poverty, but neglected that poverty is multifaceted and inequality has multiple faces and forms.

4. As leaders and policy makers, we must altogether feel the sense of urgency for at least 4 points. Firstly, the need for system change. It cannot be business as usual. We must seriously ask ourselves what kind of world are we passing on to our children and grandchildren. We need transformative change in
our way of thinking, doing, and living. We need policy makers who reach out to people on the ground to co-create policies and changes with local communities. We need bureaucracy with clear foresight, one that can anticipate change and adapt with flexibilities to changes and challenges. We need the bureaucracy that delivers and the policy makers who genuinely care about implementation and results.

5. This is why in Thailand, we are now talking about reform, reform, and more reforms. Why are we reforming? We have learned our lesson that, with inequality, with rural-urban gap, any society is prone to tension and conflicts. No matter how much growth the economy experiences, the society will be disrupted. It is often not poverty that drives people to despair, but rather the inequality, unfair treatment, and injustice that do.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. It is often said that human beings are born free and equal, but really we are not. If one is to be born into a disadvantaged family, the chance that the child will reach the age of five is obviously far lower than those born into a well-to-do family. Will he or she be fed and clothed properly and get to go to school and receive quality education? The school fee maybe free of charge, but then what about other expenses that ensue on the daily basis? These are real life situations and we have to do something about them. Inequality of opportunities, unequal access to basic healthcare and services, are something that we as governments need to do more.

7. And more is what the Royal Thai Government has been trying to step up the efforts on three dimensions, leaving no one behind. The three being illiteracy, illnesses, and income, or the three Is.

8. On illiteracy, by law, the Government has attempted to provide 15 years of education free of charge. Secondary school enrollment is at 80.3 per cent of the school age children. There is yet room for improvement in terms of ensuring quality of education nationwide. The Government has also launched the Net Pracharath with the aim of providing IT infrastructure to over 74,000 villages nationwide. The IT connectivity will help spread learning beyond classrooms.

9. On illnesses, as mentioned by the Executive Secretary a while ago, we are quite well-known for our Universal Health Coverage (UHC). 99.87 percent of the Thai population enjoy the benefits of our UHC scheme. The UHC has strengthened our national health security and prevented over 100,000 households from falling into poverty. We have also provided healthcare to over 1.6 million registered migrant workers and their dependents through health insurance scheme. This is out of the belief that healthcare is fundamental to human’s needs
and that investing in healthcare is investing in human capital and for the future. After all, a healthy population makes a healthy nation.

10. On income, the Government has introduced a universal basic income scheme. In 2016, around 485 million US dollars were provided to 7.5 million registered low income-earners with income less than 3,100 US dollars per year, through the national e-payment system to support their livelihood. In 2017, the number of beneficiaries under this scheme has increased to 11.4 million.

11. Besides, various schemes are also effective to reduce inequality such as pro-poor progressive tax system, the provision of micro-financing for low income-earners, and the enhancement of agricultural productivity and land distribution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

12. My second point is reform work cannot be undertaken by Governments alone. Everyone needs to take part. That is why we embrace a whole-of-society approach in the efforts to reduce inequality and achieve the SDGs. A Public-Private-People Partnership or the so-called “Pracharath” initiative has thus been established to harness resources, knowledge and wisdom of all sectors of the society to come up with effective solutions to people’s problems. For example, 12 private companies have joined in education reform to create model schools and to assist teachers to use modern teaching and learning techniques. Over 25 leading companies have likewise joined in establishing social enterprises at every province to support community products by sharing with communities marketing skills, packaging techniques, as well as logistical solutions and the application of science and technology on land use, seed selection, and water resource management.

13. Thirdly, Science, technology, and innovation (STI) should serve to enhance social change and transformation. Thailand’s national agencies have introduced the Open Government Data as a service platform that will enable the access to and the utilization of Big Data for planning purposes for both public and private enterprises. Our ability to innovate will be limitless, while the government will need to provide the right ecosystem for innovation by providing appropriate legal platform and incentives.

14. And this brings me to my last point. The ability to innovate, to thrive, to excel in the face of adversity depends on one’s own strength and our collective forces. Empowerment is, therefore, key to our success; empowerment to rid off illiteracy, illnesses and for one to be provided with decent work and adequate income. This will help provide human dignity and the sense of confidence that one can do it and that one is a master of his or her life.
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. Thailand stands ready to engage and work constructively with ESCAP and all the Member States in addressing the region’s development challenges and in addressing inequality. This year, Thailand is chairing the Ayeyawady - Chao Phraya - Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy - ACMECS Summit next month. The ACMECS comprises of five countries bordering Mekong river and two other mentioned rivers. And we will take on the ASEAN chairmanship next year. Our commitments to the Asia-Pacific region and to the world remain very, very firm.

16. Just as we started off today our auspicious rice growing season, the commencement today of the 74th session of UNESCAP should bring about a very highly successful outcome. I certainly wish that you have a pleasant stay here in Thailand, and with some free time to enjoy some shopping in our market place. And allow me to remind that you are all invited to tomorrow’s evening reception at the Foreign Ministry.

I thank you very much.

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