HE BERETITENI TANETI MAAMAU’S OPENING SPEECH AND COUNTRY STATEMENT
(On the occasion of the Opening Session of the 74th ESCAP Commission Ministerial Segment, 15 May 2018)

Our Host, Mr Don Pramudwinai (Paramad-winai), Honorable Minister for Foreign Affairs of Thailand,
Your Excellency Dr Hilda Heine, President of the Republic of Marshall Islands,
Honourable Ministers & Heads of Delegations,
Dr Shamshad Akhtar, Executive Secretary of ESCAP,
Distinguished Delegates;
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I begin by sharing with you all God’s peace and blessings and warm greetings on behalf of the Government and the people of Kiribati -  **Kam na bane ni mauri!**

I am very honoured and pleased to address our Asia and Pacific family on the theme “**Inequality in the era of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**” as we continue, individually and collectively, on the most difficult but rewarding journey of finding ways and means of making life better for all by 2030. Please allow me to share our Kiribati perspectives at three levels: the International, the Regional and the National levels.

Excellencies and Distinguished delegates

The 2030 Agenda is in itself a testimony to the bare fact that life on our planet has never been fairly and equitably shared right from the beginning of time. For as we all know from reading history of human civilization, and economies around the world and from our personal experiences of life in our individual lives, families and communities, the gifts of life and the resources upon which life depends are never equally and fairly distributed.

It is therefore a very bold and ambitious commitment for the world in 2015 to agree on an agenda that will endeavor to right the unbalanced mode of life comprising differences and inequalities that has operated for thousands of years, and to carve out a new world order where all human beings will live and thrive, in dignity and in harmony with one another, and in perfect equilibrium with their natural ecosystems and environments by 2030.

In Kiribati we do question whether it is really possible to fix these long inequalities and injustices of human existence in a matter of 15 years, particularly when their existence are deeply rooted in our human nature of greed and selfishness which in tum lead to human made systems that have controlled and dominated our global community. It is for this reason that perhaps, all along, the answer and solution to this inequality lies with humanity and which has the power to change what is needed to resolve inequality. Take for instance resource mobilisation - it is a group of people who develop systems and who give the final say to have the resources mobilised where they think best and most needed.
So because of this rather ambitious aim to transform a very unequal world full of inequalities between the haves and the have-nots, the powerful and the powerless and the advantaged and the disadvantaged, I have referred to it as the Holy Grail that will empower each of us to do all we can individually and collectively, to change or modify human-made systems in the world which had given rise to gaps and differences that exist today. The questions that we need to ask and find answers to are what are these human-made structures and systems and how can human greed and selfishness be reduced or moderated.

Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

Even at the regional level the pertinent issue of inequality is even more greater. For example, the co-existence of acute poverty and extreme wealth in our region or the fact that women have to work twice as others to prove their capability. These experiences whether a majority or a few are disadvantaged in comparison to others symbolises one thing - inequality.

While we acknowledge the recommendations from the economic and social survey work undertaken for Asia and the Pacific which includes good governance in the context of fiscal management, tax reforms and redistributive policies to name a few, let us also be reminded that in this era, the tools to enable the achievement of the SDGs are within our reach. There is still a glimmer of hope to do what is right, fair and just for humanity and the environment.

At the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2017, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) acknowledged the important role of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) for the achievement of not only SDG 9 but also other SDGs.

For instance, ICT improves access to financial services which in turn lift people out of poverty (SDG 1), and at the same time, cuts the demand for paper and trees thereby cutting carbon emission and increasing carbon sink, thus contributes to Goals 13, 14 and 15. In Kiribati, we are trialing the use of technology for better data collection, monitoring and management of outer island medical stocks including better access to education resources for outer island teachers and students.

On this note, I would like now to share and speak to our experiences at the national level.

In Kiribati, our islands and people are separated by vast areas of ocean making it more difficult to deliver basic services. This further compounds our pursuit to close the developmental gap and assure equitable distribution of wealth across the nation.

As part of our commitments to addressing inequality, several policy reforms were introduced such as the copra price subsidy, free education up to Form 6 including those students who achieve a pass to enter tertiary education and provision of church grants to reduce the financial burden. These measures allowed the double benefit of increasing rural peoples’ income while lowering financial burden on communities and most importantly, providing every child in Kiribati with an opportunity to learn and explore to their full potential.
Last year, the Government undertook a whole of nation approach to formulate the Kiribati vision for 20 years known as KV20 - a dream focused on a strong desire to transform our nation into a wealthy healthy and peaceful Kiribati, with fisheries and tourism as the key priority areas. At the heart of it all, is our people and an inclusive development agenda for all. As part of Government’s commitment to strengthen good governance, a Leadership Code was introduced and has been enacted in Parliament to make Kiribati a corrupt free society by 2036. In November 2017, Kiribati was nominated as a champion for Anti-Corruption in the Pacific and I want to acknowledge all the support rendered that led to the adoption of the SIDS resolution on anticorruption. Also, with the support of our partners including ESCAP through the Pacific Office in Suva, a draft Climate Change policy is now close to launch.

In spite of these small achievements, Kiribati remains one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to the effects of climate change, which again serves as a threat multiplier to our many development challenges. The Government and the people of Kiribati will however continue to fight against this calamity driven by our strong desire to build and protect our islands so they become more resilient and strong. I make this point because climate change – SDG 13 in the sustainable development agenda – is also a cross-cutting issue that affects our ability to achieve equality and ultimately makes it even harder for us to realise sustainable development for our people.

Now, with the recommended graduation of Kiribati from LDC by the Committee for Development Policy (CDP), Kiribati sees this as a classic example of the driving force that will further exacerbathe inequality for a vulnerable country grappling already with climate change multiple impacts. Recently, we heard our brothers from Fiji and Vanuatu sharing their struggle with their recovery programmes over the consequences from Cyclone Winston and Pam. Kiribati was not hit by Cyclone Pam directly but it left a historical and worst damage ever to our infrastructure that caused severe disruption to our transport services. To date, a lot of resources are being diverted to our ongoing recovery work to address infrastructure damage and water scarcity issue on a few islands that are worst affected to date by Cyclone Pam.

At our recent Parliament session, questions and issues relating to climate change impact such as infrastructure damage caused severe coastal erosion, water scarcity and increased salinity dominated the parliament discussion resulting in additional call for substantial resources to address these urgent needs.

Given the urgency and the ongoing challenge in accessing funds, Government has taken an initiative to develop innovative models to finance implementation of urgent climate change work and development priority to uplift the outer islands’ economies. Next month, we will meet our development partners and we are encouraged to have received an expressed interest to partner us in our focused priority on the outer islands. I invite also members of this Asia and Pacific family to partner with us in areas of your respective leverage, recalling that achieving a sustainable development for all will only be a dream if the marginalised remain marginalised in development.
In a few months’ time, Kiribati will present for the first time its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) report against Agenda 2030. Along with that, we are also participating in the Mid-Term review of the SAMOA Pathway.

It is important to emphasise that our efforts to address social inequalities depends on a sustainable economy to allocate resources where they are needed most. And this is where, the fundamentality of our fisheries come into play. Fisheries is a critical ocean resource for sustainable livelihoods and a backbone for our economy at large, contributing 80% towards our national budget.

Again, this comes with a huge challenge and particularly in the need to protect our resources by improving monitoring, control and surveillance to deter IUU fishing that threaten our rights to harness the resources. For over twenty years, we have been coping with one patrol boat only to cover a vast area of more than 3.3 million square km. This is not adequate and there is an urgent need now for more patrol boats to protect our fisheries to support our KV 20 and sustainable development.

At the sub-regional level, Kiribati and members of the Pacific Island Forum members have embarked on the Blue Pacific agenda with fisheries as one of the five priorities under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism.

Distinguished delegates, the path to achieving Agenda 2030 is long and complex but one that we all have a duty to give to, through our efforts and commitments, both individually and collectively so together as a family, we can translate Agenda 2030 into action, supported by partnerships and innovative policy solutions that will “leave no-one behind.” This is not only a moral duty but a human right and practical obligation for us all so that we can have an economy that works for everything or at least an economy that can provide an equal opportunity for now, for our children and their children.

Finally I would like to thank the Government and people of Thailand for the kind and warm hospitality that has been extended to me and my delegation since our first arrival in this beautiful Kingdom. I also thank and commend the Executive Secretary and Staff of ESCAP for the excellent arrangements and support put in place for this Conference.

I end by sharing with us all our traditional blessings of Te Mauri, Te Rangi ao Te Tabomoa. (Health, Peace and Prosperity)