Distinguished Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, a very good morning to you all.

The Maldives wishes to thank the Commission for the highly informative report on the theme topic “Building back better from crises through regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific”. We recognize the useful recommendations presented in the report and take note of the challenges we face in building back better from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The year 2020 was unlike any other the Maldives has experienced. The economy of the country, largely based on tourism, came to a grinding halt due to COVID-19. The repercussions were felt in all related sectors of the economy. Redundancy, no-pay leave or half-pay leave became a reality for a large number of people. Real GDP fell by 29.3%. Many of our development projects and our progress in achieving several SDGs had to be abruptly paused as we directed our attention to tackling the health and social crisis. Timely, organized and effective measures by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih’s government helped soften the severity of the social crisis caused by the pandemic.

COVID-19 highlighted the plight of vulnerable segments of the population such as undocumented migrant workers. As one of the first steps, the government helped relocate migrant workers living in congested living conditions to better housing. Free repatriation of undocumented migrants who were stuck in Maldives with no way of returning home, and regularization of those who wish to continue working in the Maldives, is ongoing.

Measures such as discounts on utility bills for all and income support for those who lost their jobs or had salary reduced, were put in place to soften the welfare impact of the crisis. Concessional loan schemes to assist businesses and moratoriums on student and housing loan repayments, were also introduced.

Chair, Excellencies,

Gaps in our education and health sectors were highlighted by the pandemic. The closure of schools has left a grave impact on our children – the effects of which we are unlikely to fully grasp for years to come. A significant portion of children were left without access to education due to a lack of access to a functioning internet and television. Access to internet for all must be prioritized. Likewise access to proper, adequate healthcare facilities for all is a must.

Meeting priority needs is a challenge without structural changes to the country’s economy. Heavy dependence on a single sector, tourism, makes Maldives’ economy highly vulnerable to external shocks. The impact of such shocks is exacerbated when the country is import-dependent as in the case of Maldives, and tourism is
the source of foreign currency. Diversification of the economy is crucial to be more resilient and to build back better.

Chair, Excellencies,

Our efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be bearing fruit. Our tourism industry is now open for business. Tourist arrivals are increasing. However, it will take time for the economy to return to normal. I am happy to note that we are among the top countries in the administration of vaccines.

As we all move from the relief to the recovery stage, we echo the recommendations proposed by the Commission including the need for regional cooperation. It is crucial to align the recovery initiatives with the 2030 Agenda, which must be the overarching framework for development as we build back better. The Government of Maldives is focused on emphasizing greener and resilient development initiatives. Gaps in our health, education and other social sectors, highlighted by the pandemic, must be plugged. In the ‘new normal’, we must respect nature, emphasize low carbon emissions, and promote the structural transformation needed to build a stronger, more sustainable and resilient economy. Only then can we become the true trustees of the rich natural wealth for future generations.

I thank you