It gives me great pleasure today to deliver this statement on behalf of the Government and the people of the Republic of Vanuatu.

It is now a little over a year into the COVID-19 pandemic. The world has been faced with unprecedented health, social and economic crises which threaten to roll back decades of development gains. So many lives have been lost. Economies have suffered sudden contraction and societies left reeling. The most vulnerable have suffered the most and those left behind are being left even further behind.

We convene today on our collaborative effort to find solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic and work towards a better future for ourselves, our children, and the future generations to come. In this context, I fully support the theme topic of this Commission Session to “Building back better from crises through regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific”. I would go further to say that building back should not be to return to pre-crises development patterns but to shape development and partnerships towards equality, resilience and environmental sustainability.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In all countries, the economic shock caused by the pandemic has exposed structural weakness and fault line, notably in health and social protection systems. For Vanuatu, a recently graduated least developed country (LDC), the challenge was compounded by a natural disaster. The Covid-19 pandemic followed by the Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Harold which caused extensive devastation in April 2020 has meant detrimental impacts on the economy, society and communities at an unprecedented level. The path to recovery will be a challenging one to navigate.

Like many other small Pacific island countries, Vanuatu has managed to escape the Covid-19 transmission. Swift lockdown on international boarders provided a window to prepare on the health side, but these containment measures crippled the economy and hindered the humanitarian response to TC Harold.

More than any other, this compound disaster has blurred the lines between response, recovery and disaster risk reduction. The immediate danger of TC Harold has ended, yet social pressures and trauma remain, and in some cases are escalating. The concurrent disruptions across sectors exacerbated existing and emerging social risk. If the coronavirus did enter Vanuatu, the health focus would immediately need to swing from prevention and preparedness to treatment and containment. An internal lockdown would heavily impact private and domestic sector participation in recovery process, add further stress to the economy and deepen the impact on community coping mechanisms.

With rapid closure of international boarders in March 2020, for us the covid-19 went from a health threat to an economic emergency. Many businesses, especially those reliant on tourism effectively ground to a halt. No tourist arrivals and a reduced resident community immediately impacted the hospitality and construction sectors, putting at least 8,000 formal jobs in jeopardy and affecting the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people in the informal sector. The 1,000 plus licenced handicraft artisans saw incomes plummet to near-zero. Social distancing precautions majorly disrupted fruit and vegetable market sales.

TC Harold decimated the agriculture sector, with economic loss estimates reaching 18 billion Vatu, and caused widespread destruction on private and public property. Government assessment estimates put the total loss and damage associated with TC Harold and COVID-19 at around US$ 687 (excluding damage and losses of the Environment Sector), which
corresponds to approximately 61 percent of the 2020 Gross Domestic Product (GDP), forecast by the Macroeconomic committee.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

To build back better in response to COVID-19 and TC Harold, the Vanuatu Government has put together policies and strategies, aligned to the National Sustainable Development Plan, to address the impacts of the compound disaster.

We reacted swiftly, imposing international lockdown followed by an extended period of national state of emergency from March 2020 up to present as an immediate measure to contain the spread of the virus.

We developed a national recovery strategy that is aimed at supporting communities impacted by TC Harold and COVID-19, providing that framework to recover, rebuild and emerge stronger and more resilient. The strategy responds to social, economic and environmental impacts of the compound disaster. It re-establishes and strengthens the public service to effectively lead and implement recovery in health and education, support and protect people with disabilities and the vulnerable groups, including repair and upgrade infrastructure and strengthening environmental service and resilience.

The Vanuatu Government also introduced the COVID-19 stimulus package with a focus on preserving jobs, providing Government subsidies and commodity support grant, tuition fee exemption, grants for employment stabilization, stabilizing business and trade activities, tax relief, facilitating rural growth and enabling remittances through labour mobility programs. The Government is spending 4.2 billion vatu for this program but may not be able to sustain the economy if the Covid-19 situation does not end soon.

We have re-negotiated and re-established the seasonal workers program with Australia and New Zealand, a bilateral arrangement where Vanuatu exports labour in the form of its workers to work in farms, hospitality and meat processing factories in New Zealand and Australia. The program has proven to be a success with more than 5000 Ni-Vanuatu workers recruited in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Vanuatu has also taken a bold step to graduate out of the LDC category on December 4, 2020 despite TC Harold and in the midst of COVID-19. We have done so because we
believe it is the right thing to do which propels Vanuatu in a positive ‘can do’ attitude that we will rise up and do all we can with courage, boldness and determination to address and cope with the natural characteristics of our existence and most importantly the unique nature of the COVID-19 pandemic that is still unravelling, with no clear trajectory or end in sight. We wish to acknowledge the invaluable backing from UNESCAP, UNDESA, UNCTAD, EU, the Government of Australia, New Zealand and those development partners who supported the development of our Smooth Transition Strategy. With their support, Vanuatu will transition smoothly beyond graduation – with new vigour, new thinking and new pathways of development and partnerships towards equality, resilience and environmental sustainability.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most profound challenges to socio-economic development in our region, and beyond. There is no doubt that the current pandemic has a broad humanitarian, social and economic impact in the short to long term and has set back achievements of the 2030 agenda and sustainable development goals. We have come to acknowledge that this issue is increasingly eluding the control of individual national governments. International cooperation is therefore critical and essential.

To recover better together, we need to take comprehensive action at the global, regional and national level. Effective and sustainable support is now needed more than ever to regain regional momentum for advancing the 2030 Agenda, while building inclusive economies and resilient societies.

To build back better together and beyond the pandemic, Vanuatu supports the five point policy agenda proposed by this Commission. We need to work collectively in enhancing regional cooperation, build universal social protection along the life course, investing in sustained recovery, promote trade facilitation and safeguard the environmental health.

I thank you.