Honorable Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I bring to your warm greetings and best wishes for a successful conference from His Majesty the King, the People, and the Royal Government of Bhutan. My delegation extends our gratitude to the Government and People of Thailand, to UN ESCAP and UNFPA for hosting and organizing this timely event.

At the outset, my delegation commends the Governments of the Asia-Pacific region for the progress in the implementation of the APMD (Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration) on Population and Development and the Programme of Action (POA) of the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development).

Notwithstanding the progress achieved, we continue to face many challenges. Our response to these challenges could guide other nations around the world on population and development matters.

Allow me to highlight Bhutan’s key achievements over the past decade, discuss the challenges we continue to face, and share lessons we have learnt.

Under the farsighted leadership of our monarchs and guided by our development philosophy of Gross National Happiness, Bhutan has made remarkable socio-economic progress.

Over the past decade, our investments, especially in primary health care, have significantly improved life expectancy as a result of reduced premature deaths due to non-communicable diseases, decline mortality rates, access to sexual and reproductive health services, provision of safe drinking water, and improved sanitation among others.

National policies have been formulated to improve the well-being of mothers and children through conditional cash transfers and for the elderly as well as those with disabilities, diverse gender identities and sexual orientations to facilitate them to pursue a dignified life.

Through our “Health Flagship Project” we have achieved remarkable screening rates, with 90% for high-risk HPV and 93% for breast cancer among women aged 30-65 years. The early
detection of 154 cervical cancer and 74 breast cancer cases through this project ensures better
treatment outcomes and decreased mortality. Family planning services are available in every
health facility in the country, including the most remote communities. All hospitals offer
“Adolescent Friendly Health Services”, including counseling on family planning, prevention
of unwanted pregnancies and practicing safe sex through trained health workers.

“A nation cannot fool herself into thinking of a bright future when she has not invested wisely
in her children” was a clarion call by His Majesty the King of Bhutan to remind governments
that our youth will always remain the most precious asset to fulfill our national aspirations. As
such, education remains a top national priority.

Over the last decade, we have focused on improving access to quality education for all,
including through improved school infrastructure, accordingly priority to special education
needs programs, and expanding early childhood care and development (ECCD) centers. For
instance, ECCD enrollment has increased significantly from 21% in 2019 to 37.6% in 2023.
Over the next 10 years, we aspire to achieve a 100% enrollment rate in ECCD.

The successful pilot of a Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) program in 3 schools in
2022, has been scaled up to 173 schools this year. Enhancing TVET through skilling, reskilling
and upskilling programs through the Desung Skilling Program and the transformation of the
technical and tertiary education institutes to ensure strong linkages with industry are strategic
national priorities in the 13\textsuperscript{th} Plan and beyond.

Furthermore, to address new and emerging social challenges of our youth, the Pema Center
and Selwa have been established under the patronage of Her Majesty the Queen, to provide
comprehensive services to address substance abuse, mental health and disabilities amongst
others.

As one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, Bhutan continues to champion
sustainable development with environment friendly policies. We are firmly committed to our
unilateral pledge made three decades ago to remain carbon neutral in perpetuity. We have in
fact surpassed our pledge, being the first carbon negative country in the world.
Bhutan has always accorded a high priority to promote gender equality. Bhutanese women continue to engage and take leadership roles in international forums on issues related to women.

Most notably, Her Majesty the Queen Mother Sangay Choden Wangchuck, UNFPA’s Goodwill Ambassador in Bhutan was awarded the individual laureate for the 2020 UN Population Award to recognize her outstanding contributions in raising awareness on reproductive health issues.

Former Minister for Health, Dasho Dechen Wangmo served as the Chair of the 74th Session of the World Health Assembly in 2021 and as Vice Chair of the 76th World Health Assembly in 2023.

Women's participation in the democratic process has remained consistent over the years with women constituting close to 50% of the total voters. As of September 2023, 15.2% of Parliamentary seats were held by women, an increase from 13.9% in 2008.

Most notably, over the last six years, women’s representation in the civil service has increased from 36% in 2016 to 44% in 2022 in the professional and management positions, and from 10% in 2016 to 23% as of October 2023 in the executive and specialist positions.

We acknowledge the need to further increase women’s representation at all levels and reaffirm our commitment to address barriers, including socio-cultural perception, about women in leadership.

**Honorable Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Despite the progress we have made, Bhutan has been grappling with its own share of challenges. Most recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic was a major disruption to our socio-economic development. Fortunately, the concerted efforts of the Government under the leadership of His Majesty and the support of our development partners, especially in the timely vaccination of our eligible population, resulted in minimal loss of lives. Financial relief measures were
provided to those whose livelihoods were affected, with a focus on the most vulnerable sections of society.

Expansion of urban infrastructure and services to address the new challenges of rapid rural migration to urban centers, our high vulnerability to climate change due to our reliance on climate-sensitive sectors like hydro-power and agriculture for the livelihood of 49% of our population, and a declining fertility rate which currently stands at 1.9% of our population are among the other challenges we are grappling with.

To address these challenges, we continue to mainstream population dynamics across various sectors, such as health, education, gender, infrastructure, human settlement, environment, and employment with the support of our development partners.

In conclusion, my delegation reaffirms our commitment to implement the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development, as well as of the Programme of Action of the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) and the key actions for its further implementation, in a manner that promotes and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, and to address the root causes of poverty.

We look forward to collaborating with member states and development partners to address our common challenges and achieve our shared vision for a prosperous and harmonious Asia and Pacific region.

**Thank you and Tashi Delek!**