Agenda Item 2(a) - Current and Emerging Policy Issues for Inclusive and Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific

• Honourable Chair, Your Excellencies, Esteemed Delegates, and Distinguished Guests,

• Kia orana, sawadee ka, and warm Cook Islands greetings to all.

• As this is the first time the Cook Islands is taking the floor, please allow me to express what an honour it is to address this esteemed assembly on behalf of the Government and people of the Cook Islands. I extend our deepest gratitude to the Kingdom of Thailand, its Government, and its people for their warm hospitality in hosting this 81st session of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Your commitment to fostering dialogue on sustainable development inspires us all. We also commend the leadership of Executive Secretary Ms. Armida Alisjahbana and the ESCAP team for their tireless efforts in advancing our region's shared aspirations.

• This year, the Cook Islands celebrates 60 years of self-governance—a milestone achieved in 1965 that embodies our resilience, innovation, and dedication to our people's well-being. As we mark this historic journey, we reflect on the vision of those before us who believed that "our future is in our past." This wisdom guides us as we confront the multifaceted challenges of inclusive and sustainable development in our region, from economic vulnerabilities to social inequalities and the existential threat of climate change.

• As a small island developing state, the Cook Islands grapples with unique economic challenges. Our small, open economy is highly susceptible to global financial shocks and commodity price fluctuations, which strain our limited fiscal resources. To address this, we are diversifying our economy through investments in digital infrastructure and renewable energy. Our Digital Inclusion Program is bridging connectivity gaps, equipping our people with digital skills to thrive in a global economy. Furthermore, we are advancing toward our goal of providing widespread renewable electricity across our nation by 2030.

• Socially, we are committed to fostering inclusivity and equity. Gender equality is a cornerstone of our development strategy, with programs empowering women and girls through education and economic opportunities.

• Environmentally, climate change poses our greatest threat. Rising sea levels, intensifying cyclones, and coral bleaching endanger our islands and livelihoods. Through our Marae Moana

initiative, we protect 1.9 million square kilometers of ocean, balancing conservation with sustainable marine resource use. Coastal protection projects, such as mangrove restoration and seawall construction, safeguard our communities from erosion and storm surges. We are also enhancing disaster risk management with early warning systems and community-based training, integrating traditional knowledge with modern technology to build resilience.

• These efforts, however, require robust partnerships. Our geographical isolation and resource constraints necessitate technical assistance, funding, and knowledge-sharing from the international community. UNESCAP's role as a platform for regional cooperation is invaluable, enabling us to collaborate with Pacific neighbors and beyond. Initiatives like the Pacific Resilience Facility Partnership exemplify how collective action can amplify our impact, from strengthening disaster risk financing to promoting renewable energy.

• As we stand at this critical juncture, the Cook Islands is keen to share our experiences and learn from others. Our renewable energy transition, marine conservation successes, and digital transformation initiatives offer lessons for SIDS, while we seek to adopt best practices from the region. Together, we can address the interlinked challenges of fiscal fragility, inequality, and climate vulnerability, forging a path to inclusive and sustainable development.

• In closing, I echo the spirit of our 60-year self-governance celebration: unity, resilience, and hope. Let us seize this opportunity to harness collective action and innovation, ensuring a prosperous and equitable future for Asia and the Pacific. The Cook Islands stands ready to contribute to this noble endeavor, working hand in hand with our regional partners.

• Meitaki maata, kia orana, e kia manuia.