Mr Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government of Maldives, I am pleased to address the Seventh Asian Pacific Population Conference.

We have come a long way since the adoption of the transformative Agenda of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held almost three decades ago in Egypt. Since then, the world has changed significantly on a multitude of fronts. Significantly, the positive changes to the lives of people around the world, brought about by adjustments to national policies on population and development would undoubtedly be the key driver of the positive outcomes we see today. However, much remains to be done, and this conference is the opportunity to deliberate on these and arrive at decisions on how we, in this vast region, need to chart the outcomes for the next decades. Especially considering that ours is the fastest growing region in the world.

Recognising the inseparable linkages between population policies and development outcomes, and vice versa, several success stories can now be told from countries in the region. Maldives is proud to have achieved successes in population and development following the implementation of the actions we agreed through past multilateral negotiations

Mr. Chairman,

Putting people first, to build better lives, has been the focus of my government since then and now. Maldives continues to implement the Programme of Action of the ICPD, and the Ministerial Declarations of the previous APPCs in reducing poverty, working towards achieving universal health coverage and
assuring access to universal primary education, at the same, addressing the needs of the vulnerable sectors of the population.

Maldives has made significant strides to improve the health of its population. Life expectancy has increased dramatically and we hold the highest life expectancy within the region. Furthermore, sexual and reproductive health programmes have resulted in reductions in the numbers of 'unintended pregnancies' and low maternal mortality. Infant mortality rate has declined from a high of 30 in 1994 to 10 in 2022.

This has been achieved through an initial introduction of a Community Health Worker system, which helped the remote island communities understand health issues early on, especially with reproductive health care and early childhood care. Gradually, access to modern healthcare, through qualified medical doctors and nurses have been rolled out from being only accessible in the capital to almost every inhabited island in the country. Currently, a Health Centre manned with a qualified doctor and nurse is provided in each island. Essential medicine is also made available in each island community. The introduction and gradual expansion of a public high-speed transport system within each atoll, has also made access to health services and seek specialist consultation much easier.

Mr. Chairman,

In recent years, Maldives has made considerable progress towards gender equity and equality. This evident from data on education and employment. Significantly higher proportions of girls are completing secondary education and going on to tertiary levels. Increasing proportions of women in public sector employment and conscious policy encouraging women in political positions and also in the private sector, particularly in the resort sector, are starting to show results.

Some examples of such national level policy actions are: Launching of the Strategic Action Plan SAP (2019-2023), the Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) and Monitoring Framework following revision and alignment with the current national priorities and launched in March 2022. Furthermore, there has been significant advances in aligning the country’s national legal and regulatory framework with obligations in the CEDAW. Following the endorsement of
GEAP, multi-sectoral community social groups 'IBAMA' has been established at island level for the protection of vulnerable groups. However, it must be stressed that a lot is still to be achieved to make gender equality and women empowerment a success story.

Education is vitally important for empowering girls and unlocking their potential. The overarching education policy of the government 'No Child Left Behind' ensures inclusive quality learning for each child to reach their full potential. Maldives’ commitment to raising the quality of the education system has resulted in significant progress resulting in having the high adult literacy rate of 98% by 2022. The revision to Inclusive Education policy in 2020 has also advocated for a shift from special needs education to inclusive education. The free first-degree programme introduced by the government in 2019 has increased the number of fresh graduates in the country while declining the NEET rate.

Addressing the vulnerabilities of the population remains a key challenge, where one in three people faces multidimensional vulnerability. The national Social Protection programme has undergone reforms and to have targeted poverty programs. A key milestone achieved by the National Social Protection Agency is the social assistance cash transfer programs via bank accounts to ensure the receipt of allowance to actual beneficiaries.

For the first time in the country’s history, the minimum wage was introduced in 2021 to promote fair compensation and ensure equal pay for work of equal value to reduce wage inequalities. Furthermore, the National Disability Register was established in 2023 and up to now more than 11,000 people have been registered.

These successes come with new challenges. The concern today is not just about the population numbers, but rather talking about the complex interlinkages between population and development.

Our population dynamics present both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, we need to ensure that we have the necessary infrastructure and services in place to support our growing population. On the other hand, our young and dynamic population is a valuable asset that can drive our economic and social development.
The investment that the government has made towards human capital development is yet to be harnessed. The human capital spending on children is relatively low in Maldives given its current economic development and fertility level. In Maldives, the average human capital investment in children is less than two years’ worth of prime-age labour income.

While the country is currently experiencing the demographic dividend, we are also conscious of the future and an ageing population and the need to have well established policies and actions to cater for this impending demographic shift.

In this regard, strengthening and expansion of the sexual and reproductive health programmes must be a priority. Awareness on such issues need to be increased and easy access to these programmes must be made available to young adults and the marginalised groups as part of an integrated public health system that combines preventive and curative health care and health promotion services.

The core of addressing all these issues is having timely data made available for evidence-based decision making. The Maldives Population and Housing Census carried out in Sept 2022 generates a wealth of data reflecting the people and our advancement over the past 8 years.

There is a need to strengthen the quality of administrative data collected on a more regular basis in such a way that it can be a reliable source of data for demographic analysis. Continuous monitoring and feedback based on reliable data is essential to guide policies for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Mr. Chair,

The Government of Maldives is committed to invest in our people to accelerate and scale up our progress towards the 2030 Agenda. Our commitments at the Nairobi summit remains un-wavered. We look forward to working with our partners to develop and implement policies and programs that promote the well-being of all people in the Asia-Pacific region.

Thank you.