Sixth Session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee

Excellencies,

Distinguish participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank the ESCAP secretariat and partners for convening this important session to facilitate regional policy dialogue on our collective efforts to bridge the digital divide and promote digital transformation for an inclusive digital society.

I am very pleased to attend this meeting today and share with other ESCAP member countries of the digital transformation priorities of Tonga and also to explore opportunities for future partnerships in the area of digital connectivity and technologies.

Mr Chair, allow me to outline 3 issues for our meeting today.

First, a recent internal restructuring in my Ministry has resulted in the creation of a new ‘Digital Transformation Department.’ This Department reports directly to the Prime Minister of Tonga who has keen interest on promoting digital transformation for the sustainable development of Tonga. The Digital Transformation Department is currently looking into developing a National Digital Transformation strategy that will guide us with the development and coordination with all different stakeholders working in this space.

I am encouraged to see that the AP-IS action plan 2022-2026 has highlighted digital transformation as an important area for regional cooperation under Working Group 2 on ‘Digital technologies and applications’. As such, I request the continued support of the ESCAP secretariat and regional partners on supporting Tonga as well as the Pacific in general, on promoting digital transformation for sustainable development. I would also like to take this opportunity to register Tonga’s interest as a member of Working Group 2.

Second, the recent volcanic eruption in Tonga that disconnected the only submarine cable for broadband Internet to the country has highlighted the importance of redundancy of digital connectivity. The Government of Tonga together with other key domestic stakeholders are discussing of the connection of a second submarine cable. In addition, satellite communications has been strengthened especially for the outer islands to act as back-ups should the submarine cables are disrupted again.

The work of Working Group 1 on SMART submarine cables and resilient digital connectivity is therefore welcomed and requests the ESCAP secretariat to continue supporting resilient digital connectivity for Tonga and the Pacific.

Finally, Tonga has continued to engage and support the implementation of the AP-IS platform. It is the view of my delegation that perspectives and lessons learnt of Pacific small island states are properly reflected in regional digital mandates. For this, I thank the ESCAP secretariat for the continued support
and close collaboration with Tonga and other Pacific island countries in the past years. Tonga therefore offers its support to the AP-IS action plan 2022-2026 as a regional blueprint for effective coordinating our concerted efforts towards bridging the digital divide. We look forward to working together with other ESCAP member countries and partners on implementing this new action plan.

Thank you Chair.