Madam Secretary, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates

The past 12 months have been challenging globally, including for the Indo-Pacific region.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has slowed progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Health systems were stretched, job losses spiked, and poverty increased. Trade declined, supply chains were disrupted, and the movement of people slowed - putting economies under great stress.

Meetings such as this 77th session of the ESCAP Commission are now more important than ever, to build our common agenda towards inclusive and sustainable development in our region.

As we know, the impacts of crises have a greater effect on those who are already disadvantaged, particularly women and girls, people with disabilities and other marginalised and vulnerable groups.

We all need to ensure that responses to COVID-19 continue to focus on supporting the most vulnerable. Rates of gender-based violence are increasing and people with disabilities, who already face multiple levels of exclusion, will be particularly vulnerable as health and other social services are disrupted.

Australia also has suffered the effects of COVID-19, with nearly 30,000 cases and 910 deaths. Over 1 million Australians lost their jobs or had their working hours reduced to zero, while underemployment rose. Although the Australian
economy is showing signs of recovery, full economic recovery will depend on the reopening of international borders, normalisation of trade and the free movement of people.

As the international community responds to the impacts of COVID-19, regional and multilateral cooperation remain vital. Australia underscores the importance of the United Nations and other agencies working together to “build back better”, and to implement reforms that ensure these organisations are fit for purpose, effective, open, transparent and accountable to member states.

Additionally, we should continue to look for opportunities to leverage other sources of finance and expertise, such as the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the Global Fund and GAVI.

The Indo-Pacific is Australia’s home, which is why Australia reshaped our development program to establish a new COVID-19 response and recovery partnership with the region. The pivot will ensure Australia’s development partnerships become even more relevant and responsive to partner countries’ needs, focused on supporting our region’s health security, economic recovery, and stability.

Underscoring the importance of regional and multilateral cooperation, Australia is proud to have supported the COVAX facility to improve access to safe, effective, and affordable COVID-19 vaccines for 92 countries in our region and around the world. This is in addition to our landmark Regional Vaccines Initiative focused on Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

Australia is also working through other multilateral mechanisms, such as the Quad, to increase vaccine supply and support effective delivery in the Indo-Pacific region.

Thank you.