Statement by Leader of Delegation, Royal Government of Bhutan
Under Agenda item 2

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

1. On behalf of the Royal Government of Bhutan, my delegation and I would like to thank UNFPA and ESCAP for organizing the Midterm Review of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development and supporting our participation.

2. At the outset, let me share a broad outline of population figures, trends and policies in Bhutan. Based on the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan (2017) the total resident population reached 727,145 of which 52.3% are males and 47.8% are females. The rural and urban population composition is 62.2 and 37.8 percent respectively.

3. While the total population has increased in absolute terms, growth rate has declined. Total Fertility Rate has declined from 2.5 in 2005 to 1.7 in 2017. However, Bhutan’s population is expected to grow since 50% of the population is below 26.9 years of age.

Mr. Chairman,

4. Allow me now to briefly report on the progress made on the key priority areas of the programme of action of the IPCD and the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration.

**Poverty alleviation**

5. Bhutan accords high priority towards the eradication of poverty in all forms through continuous investments in education, health, and other social sectors. These are supplemented by various targeted poverty reduction initiatives like the National Rehabilitation Program, Rural Economy Advancement Program (REAP), Targeted Household Poverty Program and Land Use Right System. Significant achievements have been made in reducing both income and multi-dimensional poverty. People living below national income poverty reduced from 12 percent in 2012 to 8.2 percent in 2017. Similarly, the Multi-dimensional poverty rate (MPI) reduced from 12.7 percent in 2012 to 5.8 percent in 2017. Poverty still remains a rural phenomenon with 97 percent of the income poor and 93 percent of the MPI poor residing in rural areas.

**Health**

6. Bhutan has made great achievements in health care since the advent of modern healthcare in the early 1960’s and continues to accord high priority to the provision of equitable and quality universal access to free health care services. With major investments in the facilities and services, the health indicators improved significantly over the last five years. Bhutan today has sustained primary health care coverage at 95.5%. Childhood Immunization stands at 95.1 percent. Access to safe drinking water increased from 84.2 percent in 2005 to 98 percent in 2017. Similarly, access to improved sanitation increased from 54.8 percent in 2010 to 66.3 percent in 2016. With the improvement in health service diseases such as polio, measles, and goiter have been eliminated, and deaths from tuberculosis and malaria have been greatly reduced. The Bhutan Health Trust Fund created in 1998 to help ensure
availability of vaccines and essential drugs has contributed to sustain primary health care, eliminate financing uncertainties, and achieve self-reliance in primary health care services. Emergency medical evacuation service was introduced with the launch of the Royal Bhutan Helicopter Services in 2015. Ensuring adequate health human resource and provision of quality health care are emerging challenges.

**Sexual and reproductive health services**

7. The sexual and reproductive health related services are guaranteed through legislation and policy. The National Health Policy ensures comprehensive quality maternal and child health care services provision. In 2017, 97.2 percent of the births were attended by health professionals compared to 50.9 percent in 2005. Institutional delivery rates have increased to 93.4 percent in 2017. Contraceptive prevalence rate stands at 65.6 percent in 2010 and percentage of women age 15-49 years who knew at least one contraceptive method stands at 96.3 percent. The Maternal Mortality Ratio, Infant Mortality Rate and Under-Five Mortality Rate has been reduced significantly.

**Education**

8. Bhutan made remarkable progress in education by strengthening school infrastructure and improving quality and access to education. Education continues to receive one of the highest budget allocations, with about 10 percent of total budget in all the Five Year Plans. Further, the State is mandated by the Constitution to provide free education to all school going age children up to 10th standard. Higher education is also provided free and made equally accessible on the basis of merit. With improved access to quality education, the adjusted net primary enrollment ratio increased to 98.8 percent. The ratio of female to male in tertiary education increased from 71 percent in 2013 to 83 percent in 2017. In order to improve retention of girls in schools through improved hygiene, a project for providing low-cost sanitary pads was launched in 2017 and provision of separate toilet facilities for girls in schools has been initiated.

**Gender equality and women empowerment**

9. Bhutan has taken several initiatives to create an enabling environment for promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment including legislative reforms, mainstreaming of gender issues into policies, plans and programs and promoting civil society organization working for women and children. The ‘Internal Framework to Address Sexual Harassment and Gender Issues at the Workplace’ is being implemented in the Government.

10. Further, to encourage women’s participation in parliamentary and local government election, various initiatives like capacity building, voter education program and civic engagement were organized. Presently, the Parliament has 15% women representation which is an increase from 8% in 2013.

11. While commendable progress has been made in the area of gender equality and women’s empowerment, some challenges still remain. Efforts need to be made to enhance enrollment rates for girls at the tertiary level and reduce female unemployment. There is also need to enhance women’s representation in politics. Domestic violence is prevalent and adolescent sexual activity, early union and marriage are also major concerns.
Issues and Challenges

12. Bhutan’s demographic profile is youthful with 45.8 percent of the total population below the age of 24 years. The prevalence of sexual activity is high among adolescents aged 10–19 years. Rising youth unemployment is a concern. On the other hand the number of elderly people aged 65 and over is increasing. The ageing index for Bhutan has increased from 14.2 in 2005 to 22.7 in 2017 and it is most likely to increase with the improvement in life expectancy and continuous decline in fertility. Urbanisation is rapid and urban population is increasing with major concentration in the capital city and few major towns, mainly due to rural urban migration. This growth is expected to put severe strains on the existing urban services and pose serious developmental and environmental problems.

13. Bhutan has carried out number of research on population dynamics for planning purposes during the 10th and 11th FYP. However, there are concerns on the quality and validity of data. A major challenge faced is the inconsistency of data collected and maintained by various government agencies both at the central and local levels.

Mr. Chairman

14. Going forward, Bhutan will continue to address population and development needs through its mainstream development programmes. These will be complemented by targeted programmes to address the last mile challenges related to poverty eradication and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups. The 12th FYP will focus on enhancing productive capacity and diversity of the economy, improving the delivery and quality of health and education, improving livable human settlement, mitigating and reducing disaster risk and impact on population. The cross sectoral issues like gender, environment and disaster will be integrated into all development plans and policies.

15. In conclusion, we take note of the initiative to have an Indicator Framework for monitoring progress towards the implementation of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development. Lastly, the Royal Government of Bhutan would like to reaffirm its commitment to the principles of ICPD, which finds resonance with Bhutan’s development philosophy of Gross National Happiness. We look forward to a successful conclusion of the conference and a productive outcome.

THANK YOU and TASHI DELEK!