Mid Term of the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development

Kingdom of Tonga Country Statement

Madam Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Kingdom of Tonga is honoured to take part in this Regional Dialogue in building a better future development pathway for all humanity, based on what has been accomplished and learned since the International Conference on Population and Development, known as the ICPD, that was born in Cairo in 1994.

Tonga has a strong participatory history in the establishment of ICPD since 1994 and its 5 yearly reviews, introduction of MDGs, and joining the MDGs Acceleration Programme leading to the Welcoming of the new Global Development Pathway of Sustainable Development Goals in New York in 2015. In the adoption of SDGs in 2015, His Majesty’s Cabinet directed that a National SDGs Consultation be conducted as part of the first awareness programme for the public and to respond to the weaknesses of MDGs era due to lack of public consultation.

The Government of Tonga designed a decade of thoughtful National Strategic Development Framework in 2015 based on the concept of Progressive Tonga. What a great complement national planning concept to be woven together with the Global (SDGs) and Regional (Pacific Regionalism and the Samoa Pathway) featuring the Concept of Leaving No One Behind. Concurrently, the introduction of the National Strategy for Development of Statistic (NSDS) officially launched by the Tonga Prime Minister on the 5th November 2018 becomes a roadmap that coordinates an effective response to the existing and new statistical requirements of these international, regional and national initiatives.

Government demonstrate strong leadership and commitment in providing the core financial resources for implementing key statistical survey such as National Census become 5 yearly, new national survey such as Demographic Health Survey, Multi-Cluster Indicator Survey, National Disability Survey, STEPS Survey and so forth. This national financial commitment allow more regular data collection and reporting which addressed the challenges of irregular producing of key statistics that mostly caused by over-relying on external monetary support.

Concurrently, the same national financial empowerment of national statistics permit more country specific initiative and research which includes the following:

a) The introduction of new Multi-dimensional Poverty Assessment for Tonga and the Pacific Context. This is due to the fact that Poor people can experience many different forms of deprivation at the same time – such as poor health, a lack of education, insecurity or low living standards – which are not always concurrent with a lack of money. Ideally appropriate to the context of small islands developing state.
Tonga works with the (University of Bristol) Poverty research Institute and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community in adopting the most recent but appropriate, reliable and valid index to measure and to better understand this aspects of poverty that was not assessed during the MDG era but is the very first agenda of SDGs and Population Development separating children from adult.

The results greatly assist policy designer in formulating the interventions to address poverty in Tonga with a more precise, well targeted aiming in providing favorable outcomes sooner rather than later particularly for vulnerable groups including women, girls, young persons and persons with disabilities. Technically, the focus moves beyond descriptive to analytical analysis that provides underlying information and environment that enable us to provides effective prevention and accommodating measures. The result immediately benefit Tonga and the spillover benefits were also extended to the Pacific Community.

Small Areas Estimation technique had being employed to address the challenges of disaggregation of statistics results into small vulnerable groups and it has been effectively used for Poverty and Cyclone Gita Assessment.

Since the adoption of SDGs and Regional Healthy Islands Concept, Tonga slowly shifted from disease specific approaches to Universal Health Coverage, including sexual and reproductive health and Health System Strengthening Approach. We acknowledged the threat of NCDs but not to be overwhelmed with its complication and lose sight of our preparedness to control communicable diseases and its association with the new biggest threat of Climate Change. Tonga placed more emphasis on patient focused, quality of services, coverage and achieving better health outcomes.

Education reminds our strength that drive a lot of development in Tonga since the beginning of the twentieth century. Tonga has now expanded more opportunities beyond the academic focus to those who left schools as known as dropout students which can be as high as 20%. We acknowledge that the incorporation of Family Life Education can help to mitigate this challenge by empowering girls and young persons to make good decisions with regard to their sexual and reproductive lives.

Through the assistance of our Development Communities, a Skills and Employment for Tongans (SET) project has been formally set up by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Internal Affairs to provide financial help for poorer families as well as alternative vocational and learning pathways to help make students more employable in Tonga and give them a better chance of qualifying for Australian or New Zealand employment programme.

On the 12th November 2018, the very first youth parliament was conducted following the very first political reform era in 2010 and it focused on the theme: “Our Parliament – Bringing Parliament to You”. It was estimated that 18,736 of the 100,156 population are between the ages of 15-24 which indicates that a very significant portion of our population are young people.

Tonga Youth Parliament provides enabling opportunity to introduce the voices, talents, strengths and expertise of these young people into the process of decision making.
It should be noted that an individual brilliant contribution towards Youth Programmes make it to the Commonwealth recognition awards particularly on the areas of teen pregnancy, gender based violence and safe sex which is facts linked to the areas of Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights.

Additionally, there is a stronger statistical investment to identify and address the data gaps, provides in-depth analysis, to serve Youth and Women programmes.

The Civil Society plays invaluable roles in supporting the vulnerable population groups including disability. Through their support, Tonga won their first gold medal at the Special Olympic Games in 2013 and provides opportunities to participate in the Regional and International Paralympic Games and competition. We acknowledge that while progress has been made, work remains to ensure that those with disability have equal access and opportunities to health and education opportunities.

Recently, the prevalence of illicit drug escalate to a stage that we haven’t seen in Tongan history and it has negative impact that causes teen pregnancy, school drop outs and homicide. This problem deteriorate a favorable maternal and children health outcomes that Tonga has experienced in the last three decades.

There is a strong desire to complete the remaining steps in integrating of Tonga Family Life Education into the National Curriculum of Primary and Secondary Schools programmes. It is anticipated that this holistic interventions would better prepare our children to make an informed and responsible decision for their future.

The Regional Development Plan namely Niuvaka empowered the Pacific Countries including Tonga in reorienting our country specific interventions to withstand the population development challenges that has now overcomplicated by the flooded new challenges of technology and illicit drug use. On the same context, we revisit our understanding of Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights and translate into a Tongan terminology and context called “Ngafa Fatongia ki ha Tangata Kakato” which means ‘Full/Total Responsibility for a Complete Human Being’.

Despite the milestones that we have accomplished, Tonga would like to register our support towards

- Regional regular monitoring and evaluation of progress towards the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development.
- Continued mobilization of resources for Capacity Building is crucial, not only producing of population information particularly on new thematic areas but also the utilization of such Statistical information for informed decision.
- Addressing migration related issues such as deportation, through increased international, regional and bilateral cooperation, dialogue, and shared responsibility.

Tonga is also prepared to be part of the ICPD 25 years review as well as Commission on the Population Dialogue in 2019.