Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Bhutanese delegation would like to thank UNESCAP for organizing this important conference and UNFPA for support they have extended to the delegation in making it possible for us to participate in this event.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action (POA) review conference takes place at an opportune time when the entire international community is thinking of a development agenda Post-2015, the target date for the MDGs. There are various discussions and initiatives being undertaken at international, regional and national levels to add voice to the discussions that will go on to shape the Post 2015 Development Agenda. We are happy to note that the conference has been designed in a way to contribute further to the international discourse on Post-2015 agenda. We look forward to making further contribution to these discussions as various processes and mechanisms get underway to shape the future that we want.

Following the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, Egypt in 1994 and subsequent key actions to strengthen and advance the implementation of the Programme of Action, the Royal Government of Bhutan has adopted numerous measures to achieve the goals set out in the POA.

The ICPD Global Survey, the results of which is captured in the ESCAP document E/ESCAP/APPC(6)/1 presents the overall regional implementation status of the Programme of Action. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the time constraint, I would like to highlight some of the key achievements and challenges that Bhutan has experienced in the implementation of the Programme of Action.

Mr. Chairman,

1. Population growth rate has shown a declining trend over the last two decades. It has decreased from 3.1% in 1990 to 1.8% in 2005 due to falling fertility rates. The population of Bhutan in 2012 was 7,34,850 and it is projected to reach over one million by 2050. Bhutan currently has an overwhelming young population with 49.8% of the total population below the age of 24 years. With continued decline in fertility rates and with
enhanced and improved access to health care services, the total death rate in the country is falling. This will in the coming years lead to an emerging aging population and a complete change in the current youthful demographic profile of Bhutan.

Given the youthful demographic profile of Bhutan, it is been a challenge for the government to cater to the employment needs of a major section of our population. Considerable efforts have been made towards bringing down the overall unemployment rate (4% in 2009 to 2.1% in 2012) and youth unemployment rate (12.9% in 2009 to 7.3% in 2012). However, employment opportunities still remain bleak due to a weak private sector in Bhutan. The youth unemployment figure does not show any gender disparity with almost equal number of unemployed boys as girls (7.2% female and 7.3% male).

2. Maternal mortality has declined from 380 per 100,000 deaths in 1994 to 146 in 2010. I am pleased to share with the floor that Bhutan is one of the 10 countries in the region to have achieved MDG Goal 5 on reducing maternal mortality. Further, Bhutan is well on its way to achieve most of the health related MDGs. We have made good progress in our general health care system having achieved sustained primary health coverage with more than 90% of population within three hours walking distance to health facilities. However, teenage pregnancy, growing HIV/AIDS infections and non-communicable diseases as a result of changing lifestyle pattern are major challenges that we are increasingly faced with.

3. Bhutan has made tremendous progress in increasing access to education services. Gross Enrollment Ratio at primary level increased from 55% in 1990 to 118% in 2012. Net Enrollment Ratio at the same level has increased from 83.7% in 2007 to 96% in 2012. Despite the priority given to education and progress that we have made, providing and achieving inclusive, equitable and quality universal primary education with remains a challenge. It’s estimated that around 2% of school going age children are not attending any form of school. These children comprise those in remote and hard to reach areas, children of nomadic communities and migrant populations, the urban poor and children with special needs.

At the secondary level, the Gross Enrollment Ratio has increased to 93% and Net Enrollment Ratio increased to 56% in 2012. The ratio of girls to boys at the primary level
increased from 82% in 2000 to 99% in 2012 and at the Secondary level, this ratio has increased from 78% to 107% during the same period. Bhutan has achieved gender parity both at the primary and secondary levels. However, gender gap persists at higher secondary and tertiary level. The low academic performance of girls at the secondary level (10th grade) limits their entry into tertiary levels. This is attributed to the gender-role assigned to girls by socio-cultural norms wherein girls are expected to contribute to household chores and therefore, cannot dedicate as much time to academic studies as boys.

To bring about gender equality and equity, the Royal Government has mainstreamed gender issues into development activities through its Five Year Plans, programmes and projects. The Royal Government has also set up the National Commission for Women and Child, an autonomous agency which caters specifically to the needs of women and children. Further, Civil Society Organizations, like RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women) work towards advancing women’s empowerment and also provide support services to victims of domestic violence. Although the Constitution prohibits gender discrimination and there exists other legal prohibitions on violence against women, it remains a challenge for the government to overcome the social perception of gender-based violence.

Mr. Chairman,

4. The success of sustainable development strategies hinges on population dynamics, its size, growth, age structure, spatial distribution and so on. Recognizing this crucial link between population and development issues, the current 11th Five Year Plan of Bhutan lays emphasis on need for demographic planning to address all aspects of human development.

5. Bhutan has experienced a relatively high economic growth rate with an average GDP growth rate of 8.9% per annum. Sustained economic growth until now has been primarily driven by development of large-scale hydropower projects and the export of electricity to India, supplemented by financial and technical assistance from our development partners. The poverty rate has been reduced to 12% in 2012 from 23.2% in 2007 and it is a rural
phenomena. Bhutan has achieved MDG Goal 1 & 2 ahead of time. We have reduced half of our population living in hunger and achieved universal primary education.

6. With regard to economic development, Bhutan has been guided by its development philosophy of Gross National Happiness, which seeks to integrate equitable and sustainable socio-economic development fully with environmental conservation, cultural promotion and good governance. Bhutan believes that development efforts should ultimately be geared towards achieving the happiness and wellbeing of the Bhutanese people. For example, a trade off that we consciously make between growth and development can be best seen in mandatory requirement by our constitution for the country to maintain a minimum of 60% forest coverage at all times. Today we have achieved 81% forest coverage of the entire country at the cost of and having foregone the economic benefits that we can currently derive from forestry related activities.

7. As a small landlocked country, Bhutan faces structural impediments to development and to maintain the current level of growth, we need the continued support of the international community to build on the gains that we have made so far in the implementation of the Programme of Action.

8. We have drafted a National Population Policy and it is currently being reviewed. Through this policy, we hope to integrate and align population and development policies and actions in keeping with the Programme of Action and subsequent review actions.

A major constraint that we face is the lack of adequate national statistical systems at all levels to produce reliable, disaggregated and internationally comparable statistics on population, social and economic development in a timely manner. Developing the capacity of relevant people in data collection and analysis is crucial in designing appropriate interventions and policies.

In this context, I would like to mention here that Bhutan, as desired by ESCAP has submitted nominations of three senior officials of the Royal Government for membership in the Regional Steering Group on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS). While I understand that the nominations are under consideration, I would like to underscore that membership should be based on regional representation and take also into consideration
the benefits of membership in terms of building national capacity of countries to strengthen and advance CRVS issues.

As we prepare from our deliberations here in Bangkok to have our voice from the Asia Pacific region to be heard during the 2014 Special Session on Population and Development and the Post 2015 Development Agenda, my delegation would once again like to reiterate the importance, Bhutan attaches to the development agenda beyond 2015 and in particular the ICPD process.

Thank You & Tashidelek