

STATEMENT BY AUSTRALIA – RTM

Your Excellencies, Secretaries, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Australia and Bhutan enjoy a long and productive relationship. This year marks the 15th anniversary of diplomatic relations between our countries, but our partnership goes back much further than this, to the beginning of the Colombo Plan.

Australia is privileged and deeply honoured to be represented at this important 13th Round Table Meeting and, on behalf of the Australian Government, I thank the Royal Government of Bhutan for its excellent arrangement of this meeting; and for the warm hospitality extended to me and to other delegates.

Australia commends Bhutan on its balanced approach to development under the philosophy of Gross National Happiness. We are pleased that high economic growth; significant improvement on socio-economic indicators; and advancement in good governance have positioned Bhutan well to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. We congratulate the Royal Government on its development achievements to date, on the formulation of the Guidelines for Preparation of the 12th Five Year Plan, and on its frankness in articulating its development challenges going forward.

Australia is pleased to be able to make a significant contribution to Bhutan's human resource capacity development. In response to the priorities of the Royal Government, Australia's targeted assistance focuses mainly on capacity building of individuals in government, the private sector and in civil society, and we work closely with one another to ensure that our programs respond to Bhutan's needs.

Bhutan's stated commitment to improving gender equality outcomes resonates strongly with Australia. Both our countries place a high priority on women's empowerment, and gender equality principles are considered at all stages of our program and embedded in our joint activities.

Australia continues to help build capacity in Bhutan through the Australia Awards program. Since 2007, under this program, more than 700 scholarships (both short-term and long-term) have been offered to Bhutanese tertiary students. Many senior officials, career bureaucrats and other influential individuals who have been educated in Australia have returned to Bhutan and are making a strong contribution to Bhutan achieving its development objectives. In recent years, 50% of scholarship awardees are women and we are confident that this will contribute to achievement of gender equality outcomes more broadly.

The Bhutan-Australia relationship continues to be strengthened through linkages with Australian tertiary institutions, which are helping build institutional capacity within the Royal Institute of

Management, strengthen technical and vocational education through a partnership with TAFE NSW; and expand Australia's volunteers program in priority sectors. These activities play a critical role in building people-to-people linkages that will maintain the strong relationship between our countries over time. In 2016, Australian support also helped to build the capacity of the NGO RENEW, whose advocacy campaign aims to decrease the level of gender-based violence and contribute to the economic empowerment of women across the country.

Australia also supports Bhutan through our South Asia Regional Program, which supports the integrated management of water, food and energy at the basin scale, addressing climate risks and the interests of women and girls. Over the past three years the focus in Bhutan, through Australia's partners the International Finance Corporation and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, has been on public-private partnerships to unlock huge hydropower potential, and we have also seen the development of a regional flood information system on the Brahmaputra-Ganges basins to support both communities and government better protect lives, livelihoods and infrastructure.

On behalf of the Australian Government, I would like to reaffirm Australia's ongoing and sincere commitment to assist Bhutan in achieving its development goals. We look forward to continuing our fruitful and close partnership in years to come.

Thank you

Tashi Delek