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**<Opening remarks> (as prepared for delivery)**

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Distinguished members and observers of the Governing Council,

On behalf of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), I am pleased to meet you in person and welcome you to the Twenty-First Session of the Governing Council of the Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Mechanization (CSAM).

As one of the five regional institutions of ESCAP, CSAM benefits immensely from your support and the wealth of knowledge of your countries. As you know, your countries were elected earlier this year by all the ESCAP members and associate members to represent them in guiding the work of the Centre for the next three years. I am positive that this newly elected line-up for CSAM's Governing Council will result in stronger partnerships and impactful projects for our region. I take this opportunity to thank in particular the Government of the People's Republic of China as CSAM's host country, for its generous financial contributions and office space which continues to be indispensable for fulfilling the Centre's mandate. I also warmly thank other members of the Governing Council for their support and yearly financial contributions to CSAM.

We are pleased to hold this year's Governing Council meeting in Lao PDR in conjunction with the international workshop on "Transitioning Towards Agroecology and Regenerative Agriculture: A Contribution to Food Systems Transformation (TARASA25)". In recent times, Lao PDR has become a more an active participant in the work of CSAM. Earlier this year, CSAM and the Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives initiated a pilot project on "Climate-Smart Crop Residue Management Practices" in Savannaketh province. This is part of CSAM's regional initiative on integrated straw management which aims to tackle one of the most pressing agricultural and environmental issues in our region – crop residue burning. Aside from Lao PDR, this initiative includes pilots in China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Thailand and Viet Nam, and we welcome your guidance and interest to further extend its reach and scope.

Distinguished Delegates,

Despite the tremendous potential of the Asia-Pacific region as the world's leading food producer, the agriculture sector faces a range of pressing challenges that threaten both productivity and sustainability. Among these are the shrinking and demographic changes of the agricultural workforce. As younger generations flock towards jobs in urban settings, farmland in rural areas is being left behind, local knowledge of farming practices is falling into disuse, and the intergenerational gap among the agriculture workforce continue to increase.

Digital solutions and coordinated actions can be the answer to these issues. ESCAP, through the work of CSAM, is well placed to deliver the required expertise and platforms to address these issues.

Several countries in our region have demonstrated that promoting sustainable agricultural mechanization can transform entire agricultural value chains and empower the sector to be a driver for poverty eradication,

shared prosperity and environmental health. The integration of new technologies will not only enhance the efficiency of farming practices but can also create conditions where older population can safely and meaningfully contribute, while attracting younger population to join the food production journey. It is essential for the introduction of new technologies in the agriculture sector to be inclusive and accessible, considering the realities that the aging agriculture workforce may require more training to adapt to digitalization efforts, and that many smallholders -particularly women farmers- may face limitations to invest in new technologies.

ESCAP remains committed to support member States in unlocking the full potential of agricultural mechanization through the incorporation of digitalization and new technologies to achieve the sustainable development goals. To conclude, I count on your continued engagement for CSAM's work, and I am confident that your visions and recommendations at today's session will guide and shape CSAM's programmes and activities, ensuring the Centre continues to meet the needs of all ESCAP member States for sustainable agricultural mechanization.

Thank you.