Mr Chairman

1 Thank you for giving me the floor. Our debate over the past few weeks is evidence that we live in a diverse, complex and imperfect world. Delegations spoke of the different histories, backgrounds and challenges that their countries continue to face. While all governments have endeavoured to promote and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of their citizens, it is clear that there remain implementation gaps in every society. Our governments have a common goal to improve the lives of our people. This should be the premise of all our discussions at the United Nations.

No one-size-fits-all approach

2 65 years after the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the debate continues over how to translate the Articles therein into concrete outcomes. This debate continues between the developed and the developing countries, but also among western countries. Even within a country, there are disagreements over how governments should implement such rights. There is no monolithic approach to reaching our common goal. Nor is there a best approach. Each State will have to employ a method that best suits the realities of its context and circumstance.
Singapore's position on human rights

Mr Chairman,

3 Singapore takes the view that an individual's rights do not and cannot exist in a vacuum. We must accept that there are legitimate constraints on our rights, so that the broader interests of the society are protected. I will use an example of observing traffic regulations to illustrate my point. I give up my right to drive whichever way I please. In turn, I benefit from knowing that others will behave in a similar manner, so that there is general order and safety on the roads.

4 The reality is that any one government policy impacts people in different ways. In this imperfect world and with the limited resources we have, governments need to choose between rights. Each government needs to balance between the rights of the individual and those of the community. Where the right balance will be struck will vary for different countries at different points of their history. In turn, individuals should recognise that the exercise of rights comes with the shouldering of responsibility to the community which they necessarily belong to.

Singapore's national experience on development

Mr Chairman,

5 From Singapore's developmental experience, economic growth was a key driver for the realisation of human rights early in our history when there was significant unemployment, poverty, sub-standard housing and healthcare, and lack of basic sanitation. Economic development is a necessary foundation of any system that claims to advance human dignity. The rule of law, in turn, is a prerequisite for development.

6 Singapore has therefore undertaken a practical approach to governance that has worked for us thus far – an approach that has passed the rigorous test of practical success rather than justification by abstract theories. Our people live in freedom and with dignity, in a safe, healthy and clean environment. They enjoy basic human rights like adequate housing, proper sanitation and quality education. In a study done by PricewaterhouseCoopers, Singapore was rated as the most liveable city in Asia, and the seventh out of 27 cities in the world.

7 I do not profess that every country should seek to emulate Singapore. Indeed, my point is that while our arrangements may not suit everybody, we have used suitable and pragmatic methods to improve the lives of Singaporeans. Our government
recognises that our policies are not perfect, and will review them where needed in response to changing national circumstances.

Respect for diversity

Mr Chairman,

8 The United Nations should be an organisation that respects and celebrates the pluralism and diversity of our world rather than discourages it. This also applies to the international discourse on human rights. No single country or grouping has the right to impose their views on the rest of the world. Selectivity and double standards in promoting particular rights, without due regard for other countries’ national circumstances or historical and cultural differences, will result in human rights becoming another tool to be wielded in power politics.

9 We must appreciate our differences and conduct genuine dialogue to help each other in real and practical ways, rather than seek to impose so-called “norms” on others. Further, it is simplistic to assume that norms are universal. Even within the same society, norms evolve over time. For example, what constituted as a human right in Europe or America a hundred years ago is certainly not the same as it is today. It is important, of course, that differing cultural norms are no excuse for gross human rights violations. Gross human rights violations should under no circumstances be tolerated.

Mr Chairman,

10 As the international community embarks on the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda, we should keep in mind the different realities and challenges each of our countries face. While human rights should be given due consideration in the new agenda, we should bear in mind that it is most important for the post-2015 development agenda to address countries’ needs and galvanise them to action, to eradicate poverty and to take effective and productive steps to improve the lives of their people. Thank you.