

OFFICIAL STATEMENT BY THE HON. FREDERICK STEPHENSON AT THE FIFTH SESSION OF THE REGIONAL PLATFORM “TOWARDS RISK INFORMED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT” 7TH - 9TH MARCH, 2016 – MONTREAL, CANADA

INTRODUCTION

Good day ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the government and people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, I wish to express appreciation and thanks to the Government and people of Canada, and the UNISDR for your warm welcome and hospitality to this Fifth Regional Platform for DRR in the Americas where we will agree on the Regional Action Plan to support the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

BACKGROUND

St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a multi-island developing state in the English speaking Caribbean is vulnerable to a range of natural hazards: our geography and geology has exposed us to a range of hydro-meteorological and geological hazards which have resulted in damage and loss in excess of \$260 million over the last ten years.

In recognition of the foregoing, my Government saw the wisdom in making significant investments in the areas of disaster risk management and climate change adaptation. St. Vincent and the Grenadines country programme for disaster risk reduction and climate change therefore incorporates the Sendai Framework and our own regional Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) strategy.

NATIONAL PRIORITIES

In 2016 my country was impacted by Tropical Storm Matthew in September and experienced 5 trough systems in November alone, resulting in intense rainfall and flooding and close to EC\$100 million in damage and loss in three months. With these frequent impact of hazards since 2002, my country has had to revisit our development programmes and initiatives in which we can build our own resilience,

respond to the needs of those affected in record time and align our national programmes to the sustainable development goals and the Sendai Framework, as any investment in disaster risk reduction and climate change also contributes to our overall sustainable and economic development.

Disaster Finance

Beginning the 1st of May, St. Vincent and the Grenadines will for the first time establish a disaster contingency fund which will allow us to meet the immediate needs post disaster and contribute to our short and medium term recovery programmes. This fund is expected to raise EC\$10 million dollars annually and also reduce immediately the need for external assistance. This policy directive clearly supports Priority 3 of the Sendai Framework: ***Investing in Disaster Risk Reduction for Resilience***. While this amount will not be adequate following the impact of a major disaster, it builds on the existing initiatives that have been undertaken over the years.

For example, following devastating impacts of flooding in 2011 and 2013 our engineers have been redesigning for much larger events, and have reconstructed at least three major bridges, rebuilt with better designs and technology. To offset impact from disasters we continue to transfer our risk in the Caribbean Catastrophic Risk Insurance Facility and my county now has policies for Excessive Rainfall, Tropical Cyclones and earthquake hazards.

Our national priorities also include creating a culture where our population is better able to understand disaster risk, enhancing our early warning system and building community resilience. The following priorities also align with the Sendai framework and the regional CDM strategy.

1. Strengthening community disaster management through capacity building, training, and empowering our communities as highlighted in the DIPECHO Regional Action Plan. For any meaningful change at the national and local level, communities must be empowered to be their own agents of change and manage disasters locally. The government and hence the disaster office

is continuing its work with the local Red Cross, the University of the West Indies and CDEMA in implementing these programmes. This is in keeping with Priority 1 of the Sendai Framework: ***Understanding Disaster Risk***.

In the area of education, the Ministry of Education has developed the national school safety policy which incorporates disaster risk reduction and climate change; and the Ministry is working towards implementing a curriculum for DRR and climate change in our schools. A school safety officer has been appointed and is presently working with schools to create their individual school plans.

2. One of the challenges we have encountered in applying the indicators of the Sendai Framework is in keeping with knowledge management and the continuous learning that must transcend generations. Our work will continue to build on and capture all initiatives at the community level to reduce risk and prevent future generations from rebuilding in high risk areas previously impacted. Knowledge management – information, education and communication is one of our major priorities as to build a culture of resilience - we must change behavior and perceptions. Our recent history on the approach of Tropical Storm Matthew in September, demonstrates that the knowledge gained by individuals transformed into actions when residents moved away from their coastal locations and river banks in preparation for the impact of the storm.
3. Finally, the improvement in early warning systems at the local and national level is a national priority. While the absence of baseline data poses some challenges as they are needed to generate risk and hazards maps, we are working with a host of national and regional agencies to enhance our capacity for early warning. We continue to increase our network of stream flow and rain gauge equipment for flood monitoring, and for the first time in 2016 our local water resource agency was able to alert the disaster office of possible flooding downstream of one of our major river and communities. This shows the importance of team work. Additionally, our recently opened

Argyle International Airport now boasts three (3) forecasters, who can accurately inform us of any impending hydro-meteorological hazard, and the Meteorological Department has now been reorganized to meet the new era of information and communication that is needed to keep citizens up to date of meteorological and climate information and data. Despite these improvements, we continue to have challenges in receiving information for smaller events such as flash floods and trough systems which tend to regenerate when approaching our islands and steep topography. We will therefore continue to work with a host of agencies to improve early warning for all hazards.

My country is also committed to the UN 17 sustainable development goals and will continue to work with all arms of the UN to see the fulfillment or near fulfillment of the same.

Let me once again thank you on behalf of the Government and people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines for hosting us at this delegation, and we look forward to sharing with you over the next two days.